

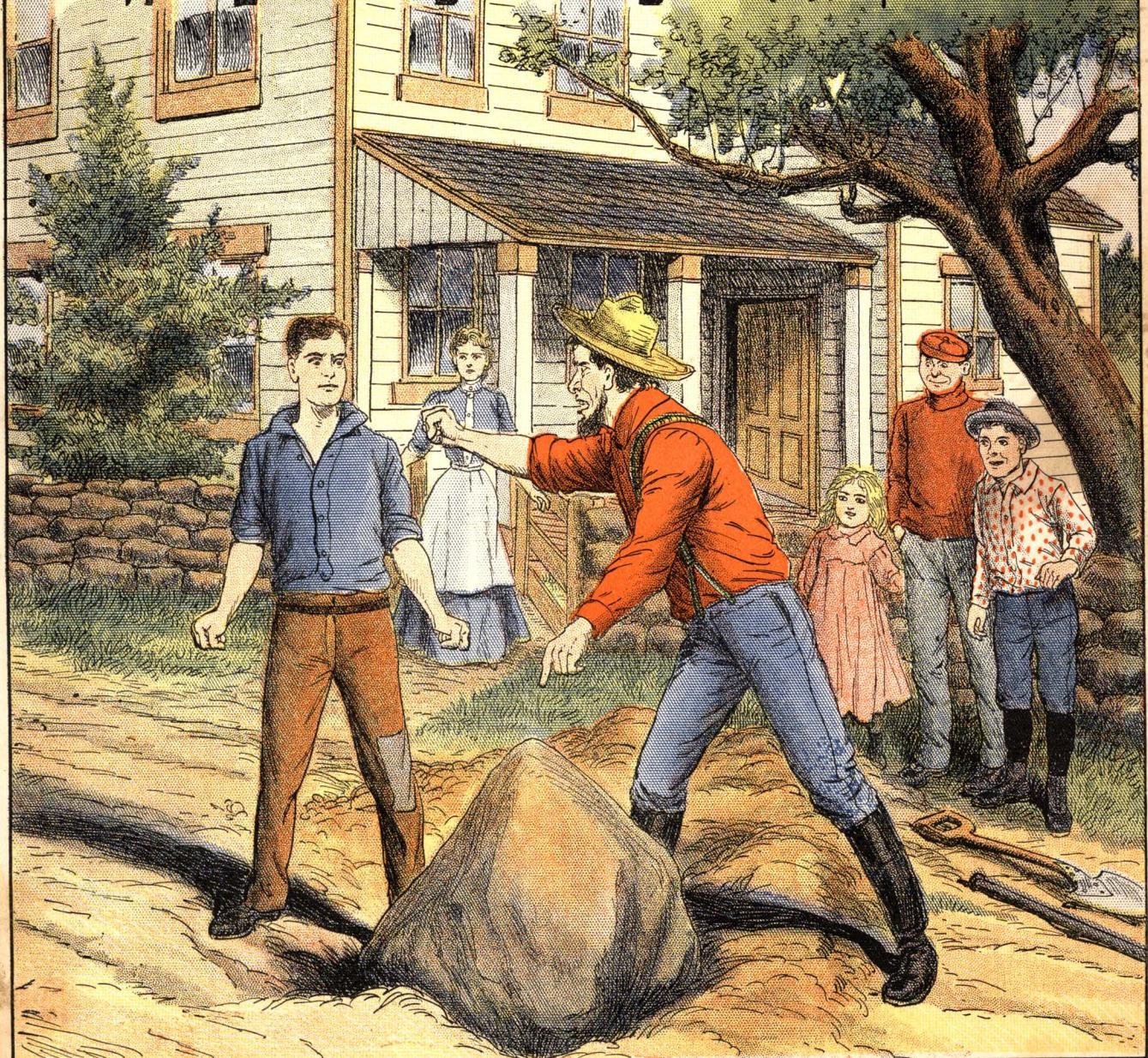
No 22

5 cents.

WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY WEEKLY. EVERY WEEK.

TOO GREEN TO BURN;
OR, THE LUCK OF BEING A BOY. *By Rob Roy.*



"If I could lift that rock," snorted Tom, "I'd shove it down your lying throat!" "A liar, am I?" roared Goggins. "I'll teach ye, ye upstart!" Tom's step-brothers grinned with glee over the royal thumping that was coming to Tom!

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Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1906, in the office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by Frank Tousey, Publisher, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 22.

NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 14, 1906.

PRICE 5 CENTS.

TOO GREEN TO BURN

OR,

THE LUCK OF BEING A BOY

By ROB ROY

CHAPTER I.

GREENER THAN ANY GRASS.

"There's another harness in the barn," said Sim Goggins, gruffly.

"I know it," Tom admitted, dully.

"Bring it out, then."

Listlessly, Tom Norton turned and plodded toward the great open door of the barn.

"Get a move on!" roared Goggins.

Back over his shoulder Tom sent a flash of resentment, but he quickened his pace just the same.

Sim Goggins, seated in the wagon, with Mrs. Goggins and Bess beside him, and with his two sons, Lug and Bunch Goggins, on the rear seat, snorted as Tom threw down the harness on the wooden platform at the back door.

"See that ye get all them things cleaned up, and cleaned good. If ye don't, ye'll be sorry," was Mr. Goggins' parting assurances. "Get up, Cherry!"

"We'll eat some peanuts for ye!" called out Lug.

"An' tell ye all about the ellerfants!" promised Bunch, derisively.

Tom, scowling, made a great pretense at working hard until the wagon was out of sight down the dusty country road.

"Oh, you—Sim Goggins!" cried the boy, a world of resentment in his tone as he threw down the harness that had been in his lap. "Oh, yes, your kids can go to the circus, but I, who work four times as hard as Lug ever does, I can stay at home and keep my eye on the place!"

It was tough to be almost the only boy in those parts who would not see the circus that had come to town on this end-of-the-summer day.

But, on the whole, Tom was used to being left out of everything good.

Tom was Sim Goggins' stepson.

Tom's mother had been Sim's third wife, Mrs. Norton having married the man when Tom was eight year old.

Mrs. Norton-Goggins had died, two years later, of over-work and a broken heart.

Hardly three months after the death of Tom's mother Sim had wedded the present Mrs. Goggins; a hard-working, faded woman she was now, slowly breaking down under the strain that had killed Tom's mother in less time.

"Oh, how Tom hated Sim Goggins!

But what could the boy do?

Sim was his stepfather, and he was in the hard task-master's custody.

Ever since the age of eight Tom had been the drudge of the Goggins' place.

Fortunately, the boy had had his happy moments at school. The state's school law saw to that.

But now Tom was through with school, the state law not protecting his chance for an education any further.

"Nearly five years of this yet before I'm my own master!" groaned the boy, sullenly, as he looked out over the bright fields—fields that were bright despite the fact that Sim Goggins owned them.

"I'd skip, but what good would that do?" Tom asked himself. "Sim has a heap of money put away, and he has

warned me that it won't do any good for me to run away. That's what they had my photograph taken for—so he could have a picture made and printed on a hand-bill that he'd send everywhere, offering a reward for the return of a runaway minor. Hasn't he told me often enough that he would do that very thing? And—oh, hang it!—the laws of the state back up that monster in his ways!"

Picking up a good-sized stone, Tom stood erect, took good aim, and hurled the stone with spiteful vengeance straight at a tree near by.

"I wish that was Sim's head!" flared the boy. "Oh, when I'm grown up! Whee!"

Sim Goggins might have been decidedly uneasy had he known the hatred and the depth of purpose of vengeance that smouldered in the boy's heart!

"He wrecked my mother's life! He really killed her—the brute!" cried Tom, his face going white at the thought. "Oh, just wait until I'm big enough and smart enough! Won't I get even with that scoundrel, though!"

But Tom realized, with a sigh, that he could not hope to do anything against his tormentor until he was of age.

"For anything I do now would only give Sim Goggins a chance to send me to the reform school!" quivered the boy. "He's told me, often enough, that he'd do that very thing if he ever had any trouble with me. And he'd do it! He's mean enough—the monster!"

So, with a sigh, Tom picked up the harness again and went industriously to work.

There were six of these harnesses to be cleaned, and three wagons!

Work enough, surely, for one boy to do, on a sunny afternoon when nearly everybody else for miles around was either going to the circus, or waiting to go in the evening.

"If Sim would only use me like a human being!" grumbled the boy. "But, no! That wouldn't save him any in the end, either! No matter if Sim tried to be good to me, I could never forget what he did to my mother. That'll always stick until I've made Sim Goggins the sorriest man alive. I wonder how often I've sworn to make him suffer as he made my mother suffer!"

Three of the harnesses were cleaned and hung up on their pegs in the barn.

Tom had just laid a part of the fourth harness across his lap when he heard the sound of wheels down at the gate.

It was a bright-looking wagon, drawn by a good horse, that came up the drive-way.

And it was a smart, capable-looking young man who drove the horse.

Had Tom been less green, though, and more experienced in the ways of the world, and in judging people, he would have seen something shifty and unsatisfactory in the look in the young man's face.

"Good-afternoon!" hailed the newcomer, as he drew up before the back door. "Everybody gone but you, eh?"

"Yes," Tom admitted, pleasantly enough, for he had no grouch against this stranger.

"Too bad you couldn't go, too, but I suppose you'll get to the show to-night. I'm going to-night myself."

"No such luck as that for me," replied Tom Norton, shaking his head.

"Say, is that so?" demanded the stranger, with a look of interest. "Folks here don't use you very well? That's a beastly shame. I know I was always mighty anxious to get to the circus when I was a kid. I still enjoy going. Tell you what, boy—what's your name?"

"Tom Norton," our hero answered, quietly.

"Tom, you watch your chance to slip away, and be at the tent door at just eight o'clock to-night, and I'll have a ticket ready for you, and you can go in with me."

"Oh, I'm awfully obliged," cried Tom, gratefully. "But it wouldn't work. Sim Goggins will be here, and he keeps me working later'n eight o'clock every evening. He'd stay right here to see that I keep at the job, too. But I'm awfully obliged."

"Well, I'm mighty sorry," said the stranger, and his tone did sound sorry. "But, see here, Tom, here's the quarter that it'd cost you to get in. If you can't get to the show, get something else with the quarter."

"Say, I don't want this," replied Tom, flushing, as he handed the quarter that the stranger, now out of the wagon, had pressed into his hand.

"Yes, you do," smiled the stranger. "I never saw a hard-worked, busted boy yet that didn't want a quarter. Now, don't make any bones about it, Tom. Just take it, and remember that a quarter means nothing to me. I won't be your friend if you don't keep that quarter."

With renewed thanks, our hero dropped the coin into his trousers pocket.

"And now," went on the stranger, "I'll attend to my own business. I'm the sewing-machine man."

"Are you?" Tom inquired. "I'm sorry, but you can't sell one here. Mrs. Goggins got one last week."

Sim had opened his heart to the extent of buying his slavish wife a brand-new costly sewing-machine.

But that was only because the old one was utterly worn out, and Sim figured that the work his wife could do on a good machine would soon pay for the expense.

"I know all about the new machine," smiled the stranger. "That's what I'm here about. I met Goggins in town, and talked him and his wife into having some new attachments fitted to the machine. Sim said you'd tell me where it was. I'm to take it and have it back in the morning with the new attachments. Where is the machine?"

"In the sitting-room. I'll show you," replied Tom, rising and leading the way inside.

"I'll try the machine a bit before I put it in the wagon," said the stranger, sitting down at the machine. "I won't need you, Tom, if you've got anything to do."

"I am a bit busy," the boy admitted. "But when you come to lifting, call me in and I'll help."

Back to the dirty harness went Tom.

After a little while the stranger came with the bag which our hero supposed contained his tools.

"Now you can help me," hinted the stranger, after placing his bag in the wagon.

"All right," Tom answered, cheerfully enough.

He and the stranger between them easily got the sewing-machine into the wagon.

"Now, good-by, Tom. I'll see you to-morrow. And say—slip off some time this evening, if you can get the chance. Even half of the show is better than no circus at all."

"I guess so," Tom nodded.

"You never saw a circus?"

"Never."

"What a beastly shame!" scowled the stranger. "Then try all the harder to see a part of the show to-night."

"I'll try," Tom responded. But there was not much of hope in his voice.

"Good-by!"

"Good-by, and thank you."

After the stranger had gone, Tom slipped his hand down into his pocket over the twenty-five cent piece.

It did seem good to feel it there!

With an almost guilty look on his face Tom took it out and looked at it long and wonderingly.

It was the first time in his life that he had ever had any money of his own.

"If Sim Goggins saw this!" quivered the boy. "But he won't!"

For some time the boy stood staring at the coin, and thinking of all that money meant in the world. Not, though, that he had ever had much chance to know anything about that from experience!

Then, with a guilty start, he turned back to the work.

But he toiled with a lighter heart, now that he was a capitalist in a way.

He didn't cherish any hope of being able to get to the circus, but he was able to frame a dozen delicious plans for spending that precious quarter!

So well did he work that harnesses and wagons were cleaned spick-and-span, and back in the barn, before it was time for the folks to return.

Now Tom seated himself under an apple-tree in the yard, closed his eyes, and—well, the boy was worn out with a whole summer of work. He dropped off asleep.

Swish! It was a stinging blow across the soles of his bare feet that brought him back to life.

As Tom opened his eyes, with a muffled yell, he saw Lug Goggins standing there, swinging the whip for another flip.

"Sleepy-head!" jeered Lug.

Swish! There wasn't time to dodge that lash. Tom got another cut across his feet before he had time to leap up.

"You are poison mean, ain't you, Lug?" demanded our hero.

He felt like thumping the other boy, who was about his own age and size.

But Sim Goggins would take a prompt hand in the row, so what was the use?

The other members of the Goggins family had just gotten out of the wagon.

"Give him a cut on the legs!" called Bunch, who, nine years old, was nearer a hundred in mean wickedness.

Lug had half a mind to use the whip again, despite the flash in Tom's eyes, but Sim was calling:

"Come here, ye lazy, good-fer-nothing!"

Tom went, on the run, to avoid any danger of friction with Lug.

"What d'ye mean by going to sleep in the day-time like that?" demanded Sim, glaring at the youngster.

"Well, my work was done," argued the boy. "I had a heap of it to do, too, and I helped the sewing-machine agent besides."

"Sewing-machine agent?" repeated Sim. "What agent?"

"Why, the one you sent here to get the machine."

"That I sent here for the— What on earth are ye talking about?"

"Didn't you send a man here to get the machine and take it away?"

"No, I didn't!" roared Sim.

"Oh—good Lord!" gasped Tom, his face white with terror.

He saw the air thick with trouble now.

"Do ye mean to say that ye've let anybody cart off that sewing-machine?" demanded Sim, ferociously.

His wife, with a gasp and a sob, had darted into the house.

"Oh, it's gone!" she wailed, from inside.

With an oath Sim darted into the house, leaving Tom Norton out there on the back platform wishing that the end of the world would come to an end in a hurry.

"Gone!" bellowed Sim, from inside. "I wonder what else?"

Tom shook as if he had a volcano inside of him.

For the first time he realized how green he had been in allowing a stranger to walk away with that machine, that had cost the whole of seventy dollars.

"Fool! Idiot!" jeered Bunch.

"Greeny! Crazy!" sneered Lug, right at his elbow.

"Oh, shut up!" cried Tom, dully.

"Sass me, will ye?" cried Lug, doubling his fists.

Biff! He struck Tom a stinging blow in the chest.

But Tom hadn't a ghost of fight in him at that instant, for now he heard Sim's bull-like voice announcing:

"That feller swiped the sixty dollars I had hid in the family Bible!"

Tom's head was whirling.

"Oh, ye fool!" snarled Lug.

Trip! He shot a foot between our hero's legs, sending Tom down to the earth.

Tom was up again, his eyes blazing despite the pallor of his face.

He would have made a rush at Lug, but Sim had him in that heavy right hand.

"You little fool!" hissed Sim, quiveringly, "is that all ye're good fer? To let any stranger thet wants go clean through the house."

"Oh, the solid silver spoons that my poor first husband gave me are gone, too!" shrieked Mrs. Goggins, from inside, and Tom knew that another fearfully black mark was scratched up against him.

Poor woman! She had tried to be as good to our hero as she had dared to be, but those spoons, a souvenir of happier days, had been her one treasure for six years!

"It's easy seen what ye're good for!" growled Sim Goggins, tightening his grip on Tom's shoulder until it hurt. "Ye've had life too easy! Thet's what ails ye! Ye're like yer mother—a lazy, shiftless, sneaking, no-good—"

Whisk!

"Stop that!" cried Tom, as he pulled away. "Sim Goggins, you can say what you like about me, but if ever again you say a word against my mother—"

"Well, what?" blazed the farmer.

"You'll be sorry to the end of your days—that's what!" cried Tom, his trembling gone and his color coming back.

He was no longer a boy. He looked like a man now, as he stood there at bay, his head up, his eyes blazing, his nostrils quivering.

"Sim Goggins," he went on, in passionate defiance, "you ruined my mother's life! You killed her with slaving and cruelty. That was when I was too small to stand up for her. But I've never forgotten, and I never will! Sim, you scoundrel, for everything you've done to my mother you'll answer for to me—ten times over! Remember that!"

CHAPTER II.

THE TIME OF HIS LIFE.

"Aw! Whee! Ain't he smart?" sneered Lug.

"Soak him, pop!" advised Bunch. "Soak him good!" But Sim Goggins stood amazed for a few seconds.

He had never dreamed that there could be so much spirit in this tame, green, patient, hard-working youngster.

But now, as he stood glaring at young Norton, the man felt a sense of something like fear tugging at him.

Mrs. Goggins, who had come to the door just in time to hear our hero's defiance, was too staggered even to think.

Only one cheering voice sounded.

Little Bess, not quite five, Sim's child by his last wife, and a devoted admirer of Tom's, piped up shrilly:

"Don't you hurt my Tom, daddy!"

"Thank you, Bess, darling," murmured the boy, with it down your lying throat!"

something husky in his throat, as he turned to look at the little tot. "Don't be afraid. Your father'll never hurt me again!"

For a brief time Sim Goggins was so mad that he didn't dare trust himself to speak.

Then again, violent as he sometimes was, Sim had a deep, crafty side to his nature.

He felt that now a thrashing would be worse than thrown away on our hero.

It would be far better to make the boy realize his helplessness.

"Tom, ye lazy loafer," began the man, "what ye need to put some sense into ye is good, hard work. Ye'll have to do a man's work before ye can make believe ye are a man. Come along!"

Sim, his brow as black as the sky when a thunderstorm is coming, led the way to the front yard.

Tom, after a momentary pause, followed.

He was not afraid now, but he had the habit of obeying ground into him.

Sim stopped before a great stone that lay there on the ground.

It had dropped there from a stone drag two or three days before.

The stone weighed at least three hundred and fifty pounds.

"Thet stone's been lyin' here too long," declared Sim, looking at the boy with beady, shining, crafty eyes.

"Do you want me to hitch a horse to the stone drag and get the crowbar and get the stone on the drag?" asked Tom, his voice unnaturally quiet. "If you do, I'll have to have help."

"Have help?" snarled Sim. "Not a bit o' help will ye get."

"But I don't believe I can bar that on to the drag alone."

"Who asked ye to?" growled Sim.

"Then what do you want me to do?" Tom demanded, in the same unnaturally quiet voice.

"What do I want ye to do?" mocked Sim. "I want ye to pick up that stun in yer arms, and carry it out back o' the barn!"

"Don't talk nonsense," advised the boy, in the same quiet voice.

He had squared his shoulders and thrown his head back once more.

Both his fists were clenched at his sides, and he was looking Goggins squarely in the eyes, without a particle of fear in his own blue eyes.

If Sim had had sense in his rage he would have gone slow.

But, with an oath, he sprang forward, pointing with one hand at the stone, and shaking the other in the boy's face.

"Pick up that stun and take it out behind the barn!" roared Sim.

"If I could lift that rock!" snorted Tom, "I'd shove it down your lying throat!"

"A liar, am I?" roared Goggins. "I'll teach ye, ye upstart!"

Tom's stepbrothers grinned with glee over the royal thumping that was coming to Tom.

"You said things about my mother that were black lies."

Sim leaped forward.

He should have known better.

Tom Norton was so mad that there was no stopping him now.

Bump! Tom's foot landed squarely on Sim's abdomen.

It was a hard kick, too, from the hardest kind of a bare foot!

Whump! It was Sim, sitting down with force, his wind too far gone for him even to gasp.

Flop! Tom leaped at his persecutor, and that rush carried Sim over on his back.

Biff! smash! Those two blows, from Tom's toil-hardened fists, caught the farmer on the nose and on his left eye.

"Here, you rascal!" screamed Lug, darting forward to pull our hero off.

But Tom was ready in plenty of time.

He leaped up, dealing Lug a blow on the tip of the jaw that sent him down in a heap.

Then back on Sim, who hadn't got wind enough yet to stir, fell the boy.

Pounding and hammering on that rough, seamy face, the maddened boy was having the time of his life, all in a half-minute.

"Tom, Tom! Don't!" screamed Mrs. Goggins, rushing forward.

"It's too late to stop me now," grated the boy. "I've got to have this out—and I'm going to!"

Biff! smash! pound! And Sim hadn't yet gotten his wind in shape for fighting back.

"Get up, Tom. Let him go!" gasped white-faced Mrs. Sim.

"I won't—not till I'm through!" cried the boy, savagely.

"He'll send ye to the reform school!"

"He can send me where he likes when I'm through with him," vented the boy.

He landed another vicious blow on one of Sim's eyes.

"Stop!" whimpered the bully.

"Have you got enough?" queried Tom, resting, but still astride the other's chest.

"I'll show ye!" gasped Sim.

"Then I'll show you, too. Two can play at that!"

Tom's hard fist came down three times more on that hated and now battered face.

"Stop, I tell ye," cried Sim, now almost pleadingly.

"Don't you try to get up and throw me off," warned young Norton. "If you do I'll push in the whole front of your face!"

And Sim, utterly terrified, now, by this young lion, lay still.

"Let me get up, Tom," he whined, in a voice half-way between ordering and pleading.

"Not until you'll be decent," flared our hero. "And you keep away, Lug, unless you want worse than your dad's got," warned Tom, as he saw Goggins' eldest sneaking up to renew the attack.

Bunch was no good at all. Shaking and white-faced, ready to bawl, Bunch had fled to the porch, from which he looked on in terror.

Lug, too, drew back out of harm's way.

"Let me up, Tom," begged the farmer again.

"Not until you say you've had enough."

"I—" began Sim, but hesitated.

"Well?" insisted the boy.

"I—I—I've had enough."

"Admit that you're a liar!"

"Er—er?—what's that?"

"Admit that you lied in what you said about my mother."

"Ye young scallawag!"

"Admit you lied!"

"I won't!"

Thump! That blow cut Sim's lower lip against his teeth. It loosened a couple of teeth, too.

More than that, Tom's eyes, as they blazed down into the farmer's, were so full of hate that the big fellow winced.

"I—I lied," he admitted.

"And you've lied often?"

"Ye—es."

"You admit, Sim Goggins, that you lie more often than you tell the truth?"

Sim hesitated, but he saw one of those dreaded fists poised over his head.

"I'm a terrible big liar," he whined.

"Good for you! Now, don't dare get up for a minute. Because, if you do, I'll come back and give you a heap worse than you've had so far!"

With that Tom Norton was up and off like a flash.

He darted straight toward Lug.

That youth, seeing our hero coming, turned paler than before, and turned tail, too.

"Don't ye dare touch me, or ye'll be sorry!" screamed Lug, desperately, as he sprinted for all he was worth.

The terrified fugitive ran straight down the yard.

"Pop! Pop! Come and get him!" screamed Lug, hoarsely.

But Tom caught his enemy, just under an apple-tree.

Switch! Tom slammed the blubbering youth up against the trunk of the tree.

Then, indeed, Lug yelled lustily, shrieking for mercy, too, while Tom landed four heavy blows on his coward's face.

"Don't you ever dare open your mouth to me again, Lug!" was Tom's parting word, as he turned away from his howling victim.

As for Lug, he sank down on the ground, bawling as if his heart were broken.

Back up the yard dashed Tom.

Bunch saw the victor coming, and set up a howl of terror.

"You needn't run, Bunch!" flared Tom. "You deserve a mighty good licking, but you're too small for me."

Sim Goggins was sitting on the ground. He was too dazed yet to get up.

Besides, he wasn't by any means sure that it was safe to get up.

That is always the way with bullies. When they're thumped a-plenty the last bit of courage has oozed out of them.

"Don't cry, Bess, darling!" whispered the boy, gently, stopping to pick the little tot up in his arms. "Brother'll come back and be good to you one of these days!"

He kissed her twice, then put her quickly down.

"Thank you, ma'am, for being good to me when you could," called Tom, with a swift glance at Mrs. Goggins, who now sat on the porch step, her apron up to her face, swaying back and forth as she cried softly.

Tom darted past the back of the house.

A thought made him stop at the wood-shed door. There, in the corner, stood the rifle, loaded.

Tom snatched it up, then put it down again, quickly.

"What would I want that thing for?" he asked himself impatiently. "I wouldn't shoot anybody!"

Putting the gun in its place, he ran out behind the other out-buildings.

He kept on until he came to the woods.

Here, after going in a little way, he turned sharply to his left.

The woods, in this direction, led up over a hill.

Between the woods and the road there were a few acres of open pasture.

Stumbling, fagged-out from the nervous strain, the poor youngster sank down just inside the woods.

"I'm an outlaw now, all right, I reckon!" he clicked. "But I couldn't help it. It might have been all right if he hadn't stirred up that old hate I've always felt for him on mother's account."

But Tom, as his passion cooled off, became very sober indeed.

He did not regret what he had done. He could not see how he could have done differently.

"But, if I can't manage to get away, somehow, I'll be up against it, sure, now!" he told himself.

For a while he simply couldn't move. He was too used-up—too passion-spent.

So he lay there on the cool grass, panting like a dog that has had to run for its life.

But, by degrees, he became cooler.

It was growing close to dark, too, as he discovered, presently.

"I can creep out into the pasture on my stomach," he

reflected, "and from there I can look down at the house. Maybe I can see what they're doing."

He crept out slowly, wretchedly, with a sense that there was little need of hurry.

But at last he gained a clump of sweet-fern behind which he could hide his head, and from here he could see the Goggins house and grounds laid out before in the hollow.

"There's Ma'am Goggins, crying still, just as I left her," murmured the boy. "Poor soul! What a pity Sim can't die and leave her free and with enough money to be happy on. But I'll bet he's left all his money to those two sneaking boys!"

Next he saw Bunch, idling listlessly around the yard. Lug, sitting on the grass, was cleaning the rifle.

"He's afraid I'll come back in the night and murder him," clicked Tom. "How little those kind of people know my kind!"

Then another thought struck him.

"Say, they haven't had supper yet," the boy muttered. "Then that means that Sim has gone off somewhere—on mischief, of course!"

And the opinion was confirmed, a minute later, when Tom Norton saw the Goggins wagon, moving swiftly, roll into the scene.

"There's Sim!" quivered the fugitive. "And that's Constable Brewer on the seat with him!"

Tom felt his heart go suddenly still.

He felt "queer" all over.

It's one thing to dread a bad fate—another thing to be sure of it!

"Calling in the constable," quavered Norton, "means that I'm booked for the reform school!"

CHAPTER III.

LUG GETS SQUARE.

"Maybe they'll catch me, but I don't believe it will be to-night," muttered Tom.

He watched until he saw Constable Brewster and Sim get out of the wagon, after which Lug led the animal to the barn.

The two men went inside of the house.

"Oh, Lord, I wish I could see Ed!" muttered the fugitive. "I wonder if I couldn't get around to his house after dark. Or will they have someone watching, on the suspicion that I'll go to Ed's house?"

Ed Murray was the sole fellow on earth that Tom really cared a heap for.

They had been chums at school since their first day of learning their A B C's.

They had grown up together, the thickest kind of chums.

Ed had always had to contribute everything to the partnership, but that made no kind of difference.

Ed was the only child of Murray, the blacksmith, who was a fairly prosperous man.

Always Ed had been content to supply everything in the way of boy's belongings, for he liked Tom Norton better than any fellow that he had ever known.

The boys had formed strong plans of being partners together when they grew up.

Through the summer months Ed's only chance to see our hero had lain in coming to the Goggins place and working alongside our hero in order to be with him.

Sim had naturally enough encouraged a chum-ship that meant the occasional services of another and unpaid laborer.

But Ed, though despising Sim as heartily as our hero did, had not minded being made use of if it gave him a chance to be with Tom.

"I've got to leave Ed behind if I get away from here, too," thought young Norton, with a sudden wistful smile.

Dark was coming down fast now.

After the warm day, it looked as if it would be a cloudy night.

Tom could no longer distinguish things clearly at the Goggins house, so he rolled over on his back, looking up at the stars as he thought and wondered.

"Crackey! There's one thing I forgot," he thought, with a sudden start. "I'm mighty hungry, and it's going to be worse. Why didn't I think of that? I could have taken something from the pantry just before I jumped away.

"I can go down there, anyway, I guess, late at night, when they're all asleep," he reflected, resting his hands across that empty stomach. "The pantry window's so loose I can pry the hook. And there's nobody sleeps close enough to the pantry to hear me. But, crackey! I've got hours to wait! Thinking of how good I thumped Sim and Lug ain't going to stop the gnawing any."

Then, as Tom was a conscientious boy, another thought stung him.

"Have I any right to break into that pantry? Would it be stealing? Burglary?"

But the question worked out to his satisfaction.

"I've worked as hard as anybody for everything that's in that pantry. I've done a man's work for nothing. I guess I'll feel entitled to grub enough to hold me over two or three meals."

So he lay there, just waiting, waiting, until the stars told him that it was late enough to go on a forage after food.

Would that time never come?

Out on the hill road that ran by the pasture someone was coming along.

Whoever it was, he was not sneaking, for that traveler was whistling—and whistling one of the tunes that he and Ed used to whistle together.

Used to? It all seemed like the past, now, for Tom

even doubted if he would have a chance to say good-by to Ed Murray.

From whistling the passer-by had dropped into singing.

Tom started, sitting up.

"Why—" he gasped, then sprang up and ran across the pasture as fast as he could go.

"Ed!" he called, pantingly. "Ed!"

The figure of a youth a little way up the road stopped. Then:

"Sh!" came the reply.

Ed Murray came softly back, but moving very quickly, and holding out his hand.

"Tom, old fellow!"

"Ed!"

"Oh, it's too infernally bad!" grumbled Ed. "Say, Tom, have you got to go away? Clear out, I mean?"

"I'm afraid so," admitted young Norton, with a rueful smile. "But come in away from the road, Ed. We might be seen here. That wouldn't do for me."

"I know," nodded Ed, shifting the shotgun that he carried over to his other shoulder.

Somehow, as they stole across the pasture, Tom seemed to see that shotgun for the first time.

"Here, we can get in here," suggested Tom, halting at the first clump of bushes they came to, perhaps eighty yards from the road.

They crawled in behind the curtain of leaves.

"Just come from town?" questioned Tom.

"Yep."

"Then what you doing with—that?" queried Tom, pointing to the shotgun.

"Why—er—er—I didn't know," stammered Ed, "but what you might need it."

Tom almost laughed, bitter as he felt.

"Why, Ed," he demanded, "what could I possibly need a gun for?"

"I didn't know," muttered Ed. "Seeing that you're to be hunted for—"

"Did you think I'd kill a constable who tried to arrest me?" wondered Tom.

"I—I suppose it was kinder foolish to bring the gun," Ed assented. "But I brought it, anyway. Say, how about eating?"

"Don't speak of it," groaned Tom.

"Why not?" questioned Ed, bringing out a paper parcel from under his jacket.

"Ed! Ed Murray! Is that something to eat?"

"Nothing but ham sandwiches," grinned the other boy, as he snapped the string off the paper and handed the parcel over. "Are they any good to you, Tom?"

Good? Tom Norton couldn't have told how good! Four great, thick sandwiches—and out of the pantry of such a cook as Ed's mother.

"Don't mind if I fall right to work," begged Tom.

"Go ahead."

"How did you hear about—this?" queried Tom, after he had finished the first sandwich.

"Why, everybody in town knows now, I reckon," Ed replied. "News travels fast in Rock Center, you know. Even the circus to-night hasn't kept folks from talking about what you've done."

"What do they say I've done?" asked Tom, in the middle of the second sandwich. How good it tasted!

"Why, they say almost everything, except arson and murder."

"Arson? What's that?" Tom demanded, stopping his eating for a moment.

"Why, setting fire to folks' houses."

"I may do that, later," declared Tom.

"Oh, say—don't!" gasped Ed, sitting up straight and looking earnestly at his chum.

"I mean," smiled Tom, "folks may say I did something like that. They seem willing to believe anything."

"But you know they've only Sim Goggins' word for what happened."

"Folks who'll believe Sim Goggins will believe anything," retorted Tom, with unslackened relish as he began the third sandwich.

"Well, Sim Goggins came down to town and swore out a warrant——"

"A warrant, did he?" cried Tom, in sudden dismay.

"I believe so. Anyway, he got Brewster, the constable, to drive off with him."

"I know. I saw them at the house, from this pasture."

"But what did happen, Tom?"

"Can you wait until I get through with these sandwiches?"

"Of course I can. I can wait all night. That was what I had in mind when I came off up this way, whistling and singing. I thought you might be lying low, somewhere around here, and would hear me."

"I'm mighty glad you came, Ed," gulped Tom, into the fourth sandwich now. "I was wondering if I'd get any chance to see you before I skipped."

"Yes, I s'pose you've got to skip," sighed Ed, dismally. Tom finished up his last sandwich in great shape.

"Had enough?" asked Ed.

"Loads."

"Then this package will last you for breakfast," added Ed, passing over another paper parcel.

Tom stowed it beside him with gratitude.

"And here's this," added Ed, holding out a disk that was whitish and shiny.

"What's this?"

"The dollar that dad gave me, so I could ask you to the circus to-night."

"Oh, Ed, are you missing that?"

Tom's voice rang with disappointment.

"What's the odds?" demanded Ed, warmly. "Wouldn't I rather be with you, Tom, than at any blamed old circus? And what fun would I have at the circus while I was wondering all the while if Brewster had caught you?"

"Yes, I suppose so," nodded Norton, wretchedly. "But say, Ed, I can't take this money."

"Why not, I'd like to know?" flared up the other. "Haven't you got to get somewhere? And if you walk you'll fall into the constable's hands. But if you can only get safe on a train a dollar'll carry you out of the state altogether. You're going away, ain't you? Out of the state, I mean?"

"I don't know, Ed. I haven't been able to think yet."

"But if you stay in the state they'll catch you. And out of the state they can't."

"Is that so?" Tom demanded, eagerly, as he opened his eyes.

"Say, you really are green, ain't you, Tom?" demanded Ed, with friendly frankness.

"I suppose so. Must be too green to burn, even," our hero admitted, with a sigh. "If I hadn't been I don't suppose things would have happened as they did this afternoon."

"But what on earth did happen, Tom? Why don't you tell a fellow?"

Tom, thereupon, gave a detailed account of the happenings at the Goggins farm.

Ed listened with a dark face until the narrator came to the point where Sim and Lug got their dues. Then Ed's eyes glowed and gleamed with appreciative joy.

"Oh, I wish I'd seen that!" he cried. "But I heard that Sim had a rough-looking face. Some folks say that you took an iron bar to him."

"That must be the way Sim accounts for being licked by a boy, I reckon," advanced Tom, with a bitter smile.

"Well, no one can blame you a bit when they know the truth," Ed declared, warmly. "And they will know, by to-morrow—everybody in the town. You can trust me for that. But now about your plans, Tom? Where'll you go, and what'll you do?"

"Be picked up for a boy tramp, wherever I go, I guess," sighed Norton, as he glanced down at his clothing, which was so ragged that it seemed ready to drop off in small pieces.

"Hain't you got any better clothes down at the house?" Ed demanded.

"What good would it do if I had?"

"I was wondering if I couldn't sneak in, somehow, and get a better suit, and some other things, if you had 'em."

"No, I haven't, and never did have," Tom muttered. "I always have had to use Lug's things, when he couldn't use 'em any longer. And Lug never did take care of his things any too well."

"You've got to have clothes before you can go anywhere and look for a job," decided Ed, quickly. "And you've got to have a little cash in your pocket, too. Oh, well, we'll fix that by to-morrow. Keep cool, old fellow, and I'll show you what a few friends can do."

To himself loyal Ed added:

"It was only last week Henry Miller offered me twenty

dollars for this gun. It's a dandy gun, but—but—Tom's friends have just got to stand by him!"

"Where you going to stay to-night, Tom?" Ed asked, after a pause.

"Outdoors, somewhere," replied Norton. "I don't just know where—yet."

"I do!" ripped in a squeaky, overjoyed voice, as a boy scrambled up from the bushes and darted away toward the road. "Oh, pop! Brewster! Here, quick! Here's the—outlaw!"

"Lug Goggins, prowling here?" gasped Ed Murray, springing up and looking in dismay toward the spot where the boy danced up and down.

Tom, too, had leaped to his feet, his jaw dropping.

"Hustle in there, constable!" bellowed Sim Goggins' voice, from the road.

"Thomas Norton, are you there?" called Constable Brewster, sharply, as he jumped the wall and hurried across the pasture.

"Yes," replied Tom, dazedly.

"Stand there, then! Don't try to get away!"

Poor Tom Norton, though he saw the reform school looming up before him, had no notion of trying to get away.

He was no outlaw at heart, and had no thought of resisting the law's officer.

"Here he is—and got him dead easy!" screamed Lug, gleefully, turning and leading the way bravely, now that he had an officer behind him.

CHAPTER IV.

A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK.

Lug danced around caperingly while Brewster reached out and rested the law's heavy hand on Tom's shoulder.

"Sorry this had to happen, lad," said the constable, not unkindly.

"So am I," said Tom, dully.

"He hit me—soaked me!" screamed Lug. "Now I'll pay him back!"

With the cudgel that he carried Lug aimed a blow at the young prisoner.

But Brewster, ere the blow could land, caught Lug in the face with a back-handed blow that sent that youngster spinning.

"Quit that, you little beast!" growled the constable. "You strike my prisoner, and I'll take you, too."

"Stop your foolishness, Lawrence," commanded Sim Goggins, raising his startled, indignant son.

"I gotter right to hit him!" contended Lug, stormily. "He hit me!"

"You try it," advised Brewster, gruffly, "and see what'll happen to you!"

"Put the iron on this young criminal, Brewster," advised Sim Goggins.

"Now, what would I do that for?" demanded the constable. "Tom isn't going to put up any fight, are you, Tom?"

"Of course not," replied our hero, quietly.

"That's right. I knew you'd be a sensible lad."

"You'll be sorry later, Brewster, if you don't put the irons on him," warned Goggins.

"Hold on! hold on!" objected the constable, gruffly. "I am making this arrest; you ain't, Sim."

"Have your own way, then," growled Sim.

"I intend to. See here, Ed Murray, what are you doing out here, and with a gun, too?"

"Been hunting," Ed replied, slowly.

"You'll find, Brewster," quavered the farmer, "that you'll have trouble on your hands. Brewster, young Murray brought that gun out here for a reason."

"Yah, yah! Grub. Look at it!" broke in Lug, espying and snatching up the package of sandwiches that had been intended for our hero's breakfast.

"Oh, come along," said Brewster, wearily. "Keep at my side, Tom."

"All right."

Tom went, passively enough. They crossed the wall and headed toward Rock Center. Ed walked at the other side of his chum, still carrying the gun.

Sim and Lug brought up the rear.

Ed was silent for a long time, as was everyone else. Then Sim called out something to Brewster, who shouted back the answer over his shoulder.

It was Ed's watched-for chance to whisper in Norton's ear:

"Tom, when you hear my gun go off, don't get rattled, and don't pay any attention—no matter what you think has happened. Just scoot—and meet me, later, at the old haunted house of the hermit. Understand?"

Brewster had stopped speaking, so Tom could only nod carelessly.

But Ed lagged a good deal now, and, unconsciously, Brewster and the prisoner slowed their pace, too.

This brought the Gogginses, father and son, closer to them.

Then, carelessly, as if he had nothing in particular in mind, Ed lagged until he fell behind them all on the country road.

Bang!

"Oh! O-o-o-oh!"

As all the startled ones turned, they beheld Ed Murray lying flat on his back on the ground, writhing, while smoke still poured idly from one muzzle of his shotgun.

"Say, he shot himself!" quivered Lug, always crazy for excitement.

He ran back.

"Hurry up!" he yelled. "Hurry, and see what happened. Maybe Ed Murray's going to die."

"Oh! O-o-o-oh!" moaned Ed.

"What happened?" demanded Sim Goggins, darting up.

"Shot myself—accident!" moaned Ed, in a weak voice.

"He's going to die!" declared Lug, jumping up and down in his excitement. "Oh, ain't this great?"

"Shut your noise, you little beast!" growled the constable. "Let me see, Ed, where you're hit."

"Oh, oh, oh!" murmured Ed, weakly.

"Why, you don't seem to be hit anywhere," announced the constable, bending close in his inspection.

"He shot himself in the back, then!" guessed Lug. "Turn him over!"

"I don't believe you're hit at all, Ed," declared the constable, thrusting one hand under the writhing boy's back. "Here, let's see if you can sit up. No, sir! There ain't a drop of blood anywhere."

"It's my head!" gasped Ed.

"Nonsense! There ain't a scratch on your head."

"It went off right over my shoulder," Ed moaned, throwing a lot of tremble into his voice.

"It scared you—that's all. You ain't hit at all," laughed the constable. "Get up!"

"Brewster!" screamed Lug, with sudden energy. "Where is Tom Norton?"

With a quick start the constable turned and leaped to his feet.

Where was Tom Norton?"

Not anywhere in sight, certainly!

Tom had had the advantage of a full sixty seconds of attention drawn away from him.

With woods on both sides of the road at this point he had been able to make the most of his time.

Ed, on his feet, now, and receiving not a bit of the late attention, was still moaning slightly, and feeling himself all over.

"Catch that rascal, Norton!" raged Sim Goggins.

"I will," agreed Brewster, "if you'll show him to me."

"You let him escape!" roared Goggins.

"You were as busy looking at young Murray as I was," growled the constable.

"It was all Ed Murray's trick!" screamed knowing Lug.

"Shut up, Lawrence. Maybe we can hear the young scoundrel going through the woods."

They waited, in silence, save for Ed's moans.

"Keep quiet, Murray," ordered Brewster. "You're not hit at all."

Then they all-listened, but off in the woods on either side all was still, except for the shrill chirping of the katydids.

"We've got to find that boy!" quavered Sim Goggins.

"All right," agreed Brewster, dryly. "Where'll we look first?"

"It was all your fault," raged Goggins. "If you had ironed him—"

"But I didn't," retorted the constable. "So that won't help us now."

"Brewster wanted Tom to get away!" sniffed Lug.

"Sim Goggins," uttered the constable, grimly, "if you don't keep that young pup of yours chained up he'll get you in a mess of trouble through life."

"We'll hurry down the road," decided Sim. "Most likely he just ran straight down the road."

"If you think I'm going to try to run as fast as a sixteen-year-old boy can run when he's scared, you've made a mistake," declared Brewster, who was much too stout to have running wind.

"Come on, Lug. We'll see if we can catch sight of him," cried Sim, who had much better running wind.

Ed, who had now "discovered" that he really wasn't shot, walked along beside Brewster.

"Murray," said that officer, shrewdly, "I ain't asking whether you rigged up that accident on purpose. You wouldn't tell me straight, anyway. But I want to tell you, if you did put up that job, you did it smoothly, for a fact!"

"If you think I'm trying to shoot my head off for a joke, you've got a queer idea of fun!" uttered Ed, contemptuously.

Brewster said no more. He had his own ideas, that was all, and Lug's conduct that night had made the officer not sorry that he had lost his prisoner.

Down at the cross-roads they came upon father and son.

Sim was silent and ugly. He glared at poor Ed as if he could have killed that youth with pleasure.

"I s'pose we may as well give it up, eh?" suggested Brewster. "After getting away like that the boy won't walk into our hands to-night. But to-morrow—"

"I'll have handbills out by to-morrow offering two hundred dollars reward for the boy's arrest," lowered Goggins. "Then I guess you officers can find him—and hold on to him, too."

"Sorry we lost him. Good-night!" answered Brewster, curtly.

Ed, in order not to make the constable suspicious, walked slowly all the way into town with the officer.

Ed didn't leave Brewster, in fact, until they reached the Murray house.

Even then Ed stood chatting a few moments with the constable.

And Tom?

He had darted, at the first chance, into the woods at his right.

Not more than a hundred and fifty feet into the woods had he tried to go.

And there our hero heard all that was said after the discovery of his flight.

Yet he did not fear the result of a search in those dark, deep woods.

For young Norton had noiselessly climbed a tree ere his flight was discovered, and now he rested secure up among the branches, thirty feet from the ground.

"Sav. but Ed's the kind of friend to have when a fel-

low's in trouble!" Tom told himself, glowingly. "There ain't anything green about him, even if I am too green myself to burn!"

Then Tom heard the party going off down the road.

But, there being no rush, he waited for some minutes before descending to the ground.

"And now for the hermit's house," he directed himself. "Ugh! That's no pleasant place if half the stories told have any truth in them!"

It was, indeed, brave of Ed to propose such a place for their meeting in the night-time.

The house was on the edge of a small lake that stood in the heart of lonely woods about half a mile from where Tom now stood and debated within himself.

Years ago a hermit had lived there, shunning all his fellowmen.

But one day the body of the hermit had been found in the yard behind that old house.

People said the hermit had been murdered for the money that he was believed to have kept hidden in the house.

Be that as it may, no one had tried to live in the lonely house during the last five years.

Indeed, most people didn't care even to go by the house in the daytime.

It was said to be haunted by the spirit of that hermit. Many were the people around Rock Center who believed that a visit to the old haunted house was the same thing as inviting sudden and mysterious death for themselves.

"Ugh! I wish Ed had named some other place," quivered Tom. "I wonder if he'll really go there himself, on a dark night like this?"

Not afraid of ghosts, you say? But, did you ever go, on a dark night, to a lonely house that everybody said was or might be haunted?

It's easy to be brave in the daytime, but mighty few folks care to go—alone—to a supposedly haunted house on a very dark night!

That was just the way Tom felt himself.

"But Ed will go there. Of course he will! So I'm going, to."

With that Tom Norton set his face resolutely toward the lake.

Had he known the woods less well, our hero could have lost himself there.

But, as it was, he went straight through to the lake.

He stopped, though, under the shadow of the trees, just as he came in sight of the old house and the water, the house some two hundred yards distant across the clearing that the hermit had made when alive.

"I don't s'pose there's any need of going over to the house itself," thought young Norton, uncomfortably. "I'll hear him when he comes, and there ain't much danger of meeting anyone else here. Unless the officers come!"

Unconsciously the boy was speaking aloud.

"I wonder if the officers will think of looking in such a place as this?" he went on, still aloud.

In the next instant Tom Norton fairly screamed.

For there was a moving in the bushes close to him that made his flesh creep.

He might have thought it was Ed, but this something coming at him out of the bushes seemed to fairly fly across space.

And that something bumped into him, and knocked him down.

Ed wouldn't do that!

And now, as Tom found himself lying on his back, this something that had knocked him down, and which looked very much like a real man—dark, short, and thick-set, and with a close, cropped beard—dove a hand into a rear pocket.

Out came a revolver.

"Oh, pshaw!" blurted Tom, strangely enough no longer afraid.

"You don't mind these things, eh?" leered the stranger, pointing the weapon at Tom's head.

"It's just a plain, human man!" throbbed Tom. "What a fool I was, anyway! Of course there are no real ghosts!"

"What have you got to say for yourself?" demanded the man with the gun.

"What do you want me to say?" Tom queried, blankly.

"What are you doing around here?" came the sharp query.

"I just happened to be here," the boy answered.

"A likely story!"

"It's the truth, though."

"What was that about the officers coming here?"

The man was eyeing our hero keenly.

But this was getting much too close to personal affairs to suit young Norton.

"Well, why don't you answer?" cried the other, sharply.

"It's nothing that concerns you," retorted Tom, stolidly.

"I'm rather inclined to think it does," rejoined the other, grimly.

By this time our hero was beginning to see new light on affairs.

"Aha," he muttered, "are the officers looking for you, too?"

The man winced, as if someone had struck him a blow.

"I didn't say so," he grumbled.

"Neither did I," came from Tom. "All this talk about officers was on your side."

"Didn't I hear you wondering whether the officers would think to come here?"

"Maybe."

"Then what did you mean by that?"

"None of your business," stoutly declared Tom, who was beginning to get his grit back very thoroughly.

"See here, lad, I'm not of the kind that take such an answer as that! Tell me the whole truth at once, or you'll know just what it feels like to have a bullet entering your hide!"

"So will you, too!" clicked a voice from the bushes be-

hind. "Put your hands up blamed quick—or you get it!" Mr. Man got his hands up about as quickly as he could, carrying the revolver up with his right hand.

Then he wheeled, looking into the steadfast eyes of Ed Murray.

Those eyes were located behind the barrels of his shotgun.

"See here," wheedled the fellow, as he kept his hands up, "we ought not to get along bad together. You two are friends, ain't you?"

"I guess yes!" came dryly from Ed.

"Well, I know one of you boys, now, and it's all right. The one that's just getting up from the ground is Sim Goggins' boy. So we ought to get along all right."

"Sim Goggins' boy, am I?" flared Tom. "Then you're a blamed liar!"

"What?" demanded the fellow who had his hands up. "You ain't in with Sim?"

"No more than I am with Old Nick himself!" gritted Tom. "If you're trading on my friendship for Sim Goggins—"

With a sudden plunge the stranger ducked low and ran—ran for all he was worth!

CHAPTER V.

THE RIDDLE OF THE WOODS.

"Shall I shoot?" quivered Ed.

"No!" rang sharply in Tom's tone.

Rising, Ed shouldered his gun.

"I ought to have shot," he said simply.

"We haven't any right to go around shooting folks."

"But he was threatening to shoot you."

"His breaking the law wouldn't help us out in doing it, Ed."

Crack! Whew-ew-ew! whizz-zz!

Mr. Stranger had halted down among the trees and had fired plumb at them.

Even in the dark it was such a good shot that the bullet passed between the boys' heads.

"Gracious!" gasped Ed.

Raising his gun, he fired like a flash.

But another shot came from the revolver. That rascal had the range uncomfortably close.

Someone was going to get killed if they stayed there!

"Run, Tom!" quavered Ed, and fired the second barrel of his gun.

Two more shots from the revolver pursued them as they went helter-skelter along the nearest path.

As they ran Ed opened his gun, slipping in two more shells.

Nor did the youngsters stop running until they had covered a good quarter of a mile.

Then, winded by the sprint they had made, both stopped, blowing hard.

"He—ain't following us—or—he'd shoot!" Ed declared.

"Let's stop and get our wind," whispered Tom.

Stop they did, but Ed, with both hammers of his gun up, kept a mighty alert watch.

"Say, what do you make of that?" gasped Murray, after a few moments.

"Think we had a mighty lucky escape," retorted Tom, grimly.

"But what did that fellow get mad about?"

"Blessed if I know," uttered Tom, slowly. "But of course there must have been a reason. Now, let's think it out. No trouble happened until we got close to the hermit's haunted house. Then that fellow showed up, and seemed mighty mad over my being there. He didn't like my few words about officers, either. And this Mr. Man doesn't hesitate to shoot to kill. So what's the guess?"

"It's something to do with the haunted house itself," guessed Ed.

"It must be. And another thing! That fellow spoke as if he knew Sim Goggins, and considered Sim to be all right. If those two fellows know each other well then there's something wrong with Sim, just as there is with Mr. Man!"

"Gracious! That's so," nodded Ed, opening his eyes.

"Now, Mr. Man wouldn't have caught me if he hadn't been coming my way. Doesn't that look as if he was headed over to the county road? And don't Sim live just off the county road. Now, if Mr. Man was headed that way, and has a good opinion of Sim Goggins, ain't it likely that Mr. Man and Sim are thinking of meeting? Mr. Man would seem to have that idea, anyway."

"You believe Mr. Man is going to call on Sim?" asked Ed, wonderingly.

"I don't know. But I do know that I hear somebody coming up the path now. Don't you?"

Ed gave a close ear to the path, and nodded quickly.

"Come along on tip-toe, and dust fast," whispered Tom. "But don't make any noise."

It was not long ere they came out close to the county road.

But Tom dragged his chum swiftly in behind the bushes.

"We can see the path from here," he whispered. "And we can see if the fellow coming is Mr. Man. If it is we'll see if he's headed Sim's way."

It was not long before the sound of steps down the path reached the ears of the listeners.

Both lay low, but used their eyes in the dark for all they were worth.

Yes, it was the stranger who came out of the woods.

Both boys recognized him at about the same instant, though neither let his lips move.

But Mr. Man, now that he had reached the county road, did not seem in a hurry.

Leaning against a tree, he took out a cigarette and lighted it.

Tom and Ed looked at each other without speaking.

"He's waiting for someone," was what their eyes said, and both boys nodded that they understood the mute message.

The minutes dragged by, but the stranger did not appear to be impatient.

He had lighted and smoked two more cigarettes before the sound of wagon wheels reached the ears of all three.

Then a fast-stepping horse came up.

Tom recognized it at once as one of Sim's horses.

Then the driver pulled up, asking, softly:

"All right?"

"All right."

"Something kept me waiting," mumbled Sim. "But jump in."

Mr. Man sprang nimbly up beside Sim.

Then Goggins drove down the path through the woods to the haunted house.

That path was just about wide enough for a horse to get through comfortably.

"If we follow, we'll know a good deal," blazed Tom, springing up as soon as Sim's light wagon had disappeared.

He began to run down the path before he saw whether Ed was really game to follow.

But Ed was game. No mistake about that!

"That's a good horse!" panted Ed.

"Too good for us," panted Tom. "But still, we can reach the haunted house only a few minutes behind the nag."

They kept up their hard run until forced to pause for wind.

Then they walked, for a while, before they again broke into a run.

But it was Tom who at last gave the signal for another halt.

"We're so blamed close to the house now," he whispered, "that we'd better walk, and go softly at that."

So they stole forward, with an ever-increasing feeling of awe inside as they got nearer to the dread spot.

"What's that?" whispered Tom, sharply holding up his chum.

Both listened.

"The wagon moving away from the house again," whispered our hero. "They're coming back. Duck in here with me!"

They dodged behind screening bushes.

But soon both boys looked at each other.

"Wrong guess that time," uttered Tom, dryly. "They ain't coming this way. They've driven along the road that goes around the lake to the other side."

"Too late, then!" sighed Ed.

"Why too late?"

"We can't hope to catch up with that good horse."

"But there's the house."

"Ugh!" shuddered Murray.

"But, Ed, we've got to get into that house. Sim Goggins is engaged in some mysterious business. Crooked business, most likely. Ed, I've got to find out what that business is!"

"Why have you?" asked Ed, looking wonderingly at his chum. "Especially when it seems certain that we'll get into big trouble if we follow this thing up too far."

"Why?" pulsated Tom. "Why? Because, Ed Murray, if Sim Goggins is up to something really crooked I've got to know all about it. I've got to show him up and bring him to book. Why, Ed, this is my great chance to even up with Sim Goggins all the big grudge I've got against him!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE DEN OF TERROR.

"Of course, if it's a chance to get square with Sim——" replied Ed, slowly.

"It is," said Tom Norton, eagerly.

"Then I'm with you."

"I knew you would be. And now's the time to strike—while Sim and Mr. Man are away."

"You're going down to the haunted house, then?"

"I'm going in the haunted house!"

"Whew!" uttered Ed.

"I'm going to search it from top to bottom!"

"Ugh!"

"It's the only thing to do," Tom stoutly asserted, "if we want to know all that's there."

"And suppose there's nothing there?"

"Then, at least," smiled Tom, "there's nothing to be afraid of, in that case."

"You don't believe in spooks, then?"

"I don't in the day-time," Ed answered, truthfully.

"I don't, at any time in the twenty-four hours. Come along, Ed. You've got the gun if we run into any mischief."

"I'm glad of that!"

"Then it ain't spooks you're afraid of," laughed Tom Norton, softly. "Powder and shot wouldn't do any damage to a spook."

As if that point were settled young Norton started down the path.

Ed kept at his side, but was cautious.

"You ain't going to walk right down to the house, are you, Tom?"

"Why not? Sim and his friend are away."

"But there may be others there."

"Huh! A place with the reputation of that house ain't no boarding-house!"

Ed kept up, feeling that he had offered objections. Anyway, if Tom Norton wanted to go through that house, his chum was bound to go with him. Else what was the good of having a chum?

But Tom slowed up as they came to the clearing before the house.

"Let's look the place over well," he whispered. "I don't believe there's anyone around."

"I hope not."

"Come along—on tip-toe. We'll see if there's any way of getting inside."

Ed went along, but he kept his shot-gun in instant readiness for use.

First of all Tom led the way up to the door.

Getting close, they went more slowly.

The last ten yards, side by side, they moved forward a step at a time, pausing to listen after each step.

"It's all right," Tom's nod seemed to say.

Then they went closer to the closed, darkened door.

They were almost at the threshold, when—

A dull, bluish, most unearthly light glowed out overhead.

Yet it was impossible for the startled boys to tell just where that light came from.

It was there; that was all they knew.

Those unearthly, dull rays of blue light fell over their faces, seeming to give each a ghostly look.

"O-o-o-o-o-oh!"

It was a most unearthly moan that seemed to come from inside the house.

"Gracious!" almost screamed Ed, darting back.

Tom could feel his own hair standing up on end. The cold chills ran all the way down his spine.

"O-o-o-o-o-oh!"

That awful moan again. Yes, it surely came from inside the house!

And all the while that ghastly blue light kept up.

"It's skiddoo for mine!" quavered Ed, afraid without shame.

Shaking like a leaf, he wheeled and made off on a trembling run.

"Oh, well—" gasped Tom.

He followed his chum, catching him just at the end of the woods and holding tightly on to his arm.

"Hold on, Ed! It's all right!"

"Say," quivered Murray, his eyes starting as he half-struggled to get free, "you've got the queerest idea of what's all right that I ever knew any fellow to have!"

"That light ain't there, and the noise has stopped," continued Tom.

Ed took a look, and saw that that was so.

Though Tom was the cooler of the two, his own eyes were as "big as saucers," and that momentary blue light seemed to have left a queer greenish cast over his face.

"Once of that is enough for anyone," affirmed Ed, in a voice that shook.

"Why," declared Tom, "it was queer, but did you notice that neither of us got hurt?"

"I'd a heap rather be hurt, than scared like that!" Ed retorted.

"But I want to know the meaning of it all?"

"You can search me!"

"No," said Norton, slowly and gravely, "I'm going to search the house."

Ed glared at his chum as if he thought he had a lunatic to deal with.

"What are you talking about, Tom Norton?"

"The house! I'm going back to it. I'm going to have a look-in."

"Oh, forget it!"

"I couldn't. I've got to know the reason for that queer light. And you remember that moan, Ed?"

"I can't forget it," shuddered the other boy.

"Either that voice was meant to fool us, and scare us, or else somebody is suffering, Ed. We have simply got to find out which. Suppose somebody's dying there?"

Ed looked sober. He wasn't a coward, and he didn't like to look like one.

"I suppose we really ought to go back, Tom."

Norton's eyes glowed with the relief he felt.

"I'm glad to hear you talk like that, Ed. It shows you haven't lost your spunk. Come along. Now is as good as waiting."

Tom showed his own grit by starting to walk back in the lead.

But Ed wouldn't have that. He caught up at his chum's side, and together they went forward, gritty, even if not very resolute.

"Keep your eyes open this time," whispered Tom, hoarsely. "Maybe we'll be able to make out just what starts that light and that awful noise."

But as they neared the door they went even more slowly than they had done the time before.

They could hear each other's hearts beating.

Yet nothing happened, until they stood just before the threshold again. Then:

"O-o-o-o-o-oh!"

That same awful moan, but there seemed to be even more of agony and torment in the sound.

And once more, as the boys looked uncertainly at each other, that dull bluish light streamed over their faces from some point above.

"O-o-o-o-o-oh!"

It was more than they could endure.

Without a sign to the other, each turned and fled.

But they halted again at the edge of the woods.

"Say!" snorted Tom. "Do you understand, Ed, that we're acting like a pair of babies?"

"I know I feel more timid than a pack of babies," Ed chatteringly admitted.

"But why? Just as before, we didn't get hurt a bit. Nothing but a scare. Now, Ed, I'm going to get my wind, and I'm going back. We'll hear the moan, and that light will shine again. But I'm not going to skiddoo this time, and don't you, either. We'll stay and see the thing through. Is that agreed?"

Tom had spoken in a hoarse whisper.

Ed's flesh was twitching visibly through his clothes, but he answered, gamely enough:

"Yes, I'll stay this time!"

"And go into the house with me—if we can find a way to get in?"

"Tom Norton, I'll go anywhere that you do!"

"Good enough! Come on, then!"

Side by side, eyes and ears on the alert, they advanced. But this time there was something new doing.

Just as they got close enough to the door to see it distinctly that former barrier swung slowly, silently open.

Both boys stopped with a jerk.

But no one, nothing, came out.

"What on earth does that mean?" whispered Ed.

"Why," Tom rejoined, "it may mean nothing more than that the breeze has blown the door open."

"But there isn't any breeze!"

"There's an open door, anyway. Got any matches?"

"Yep."

"Let me have 'em."

Ed transferred something less than a dozen matches to Tom's outstretched and somewhat unsteady hand.

"Now, I'll lead——"

"No; I'll go with you, Tom."

"But I want you to keep just behind me, and have the gun ready. I'll attend to the matches."

So Ed fell behind.

There was the same strange light, the same nerve-jarring moan as they neared the threshold.

But this time Tom, true to his promise, did not hesitate.

He stepped boldly over the threshold, inside.

Ed followed close.

Flare! Tom had struck a match. They were inside a narrow, not very long hallway.

That was all they had time to see when some gust blew out the match.

Bang! That was the sudden, noisy closing of the door behind them.

Tom struck another match in haste.

Pouf! It was out. Tom's hand was a little more unsteady as he got ready with another match.

"Try to keep it going this time," quivered Ed.

Flare! Pouf! Nothing beyond a bit of the walls had they seen when the brief light was gone.

"O-o-oh, murder!" yelled Ed.

There was the sound of a scuffle back there. Tom fell valiantly back on his chum to help.

But he and Ed only fell into each other's arms.

"What's wrong? And—where's your gun, Ed?" gasped Tom, hoarsely.

"I—I don't know. Something—got it!"

"Got your gun?"

Tom almost screamed now.

"Of—of course," chattered Murray. "I haven't got it—and you didn't hear it fall anywhere."

Both boys could almost hear their flesh "creep."

This was twenty times as grawsome a place as either had expected to get into!

"Wait, and I'll make a match go this time," sputtered Tom.

"And—I'll feel—and see if I can get that pesky door open."

In rapid succession Tom struck several matches.

Twice the splinter of wood burned just long enough for our hero to get a fleeting glimpse of his chum.

But the matches went out with amazing rapidity.

"Where's the breeze coming from that does it?" wondered Norton to himself. "I don't feel much draft here."

But one after another the matches went out. Finally our hero had just one left.

"This is the last match, Ed," he whispered, softly.

There was no reply.

"Ed!"

Not another sound, except Tom's voice!

"ED!"

Why couldn't his chum make some sound?

"Ed, why don't you answer a fellow?"

The appeal was as useless as before.

"Where are you, Ed? Speak quick, for heaven's sake!"

There being still no answer, Tom darted blindly through the dark toward the door that his friend had gone to try.

He found the door, tried it with frantic clutch, but the barrier remained firm.

Then back again, to the other end of the little hallway ran the boy, landing up against a blank wall with a bump.

Once more he made his way back, tripping, this time, over a beam that lay on the floor close to the wall.

But not a sign of Ed Murray could he find, with his wildly groping hands and feet.

Tom's hair wasn't merely standing on end now.

It seemed to be trying to rise wholly out of his scalp.

"Whew! This is just awful!" he groaned, the cold ooze standing out all over his skin.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FRANTIC ONE.

It was almost as bad as dying—to be shut up in that awful place!

Unable to get out! Unable to find his chum! Impossible, even, to guess what had become of Murray!

"Ed!" screamed our hero, at the top of his voice, again and again. "Oh, Ed Murray, where are you?"

But in that dull, close, damp place, there was not even an echo to the frantic voice.

"Ed! Ed! Ed!"

Then suddenly something was hurled, or hurled itself against our hero.

Tom let out a good, honest yell as he felt that something, after the impact, groping with him.

"Oh, Tom!" sounded Ed's terror-frenzied voice.

"Ed? That you? Thank heaven!"

"Let's get out of this dreadful place!"

"Amen, with all my heart!" roared Tom Norton.

"But how?" asked Ed, faintly.

"Here, here! Brace up! Take hold of my hand. Come with me. Now! Grab this up!"

Tom had laid one of Ed's clammy hands on the beam on the floor.

"Get the hind end of this on your shoulder, quick!" ordered Tom. "Hold it there! Now, make a rush forward with me! Battering ram—at the door!"

Ed's frantic desire to get out of that infernal place made him understand enough of the command to act.

With the beam on their shoulders, Tom in advance, they fairly leaped down the corridor at the door.

And that beam they hurled with telling force against the door.

Crash! Splintered and jarred, the door was almost down.

Tom got hold of it with his frantic hands. Ed, too, found a hold.

"Together!" pulsed Norton.

The door yielded before their combined assault.

A rush, and they were in the open air.

"Give me your hand," gasped Tom, for he saw his chum reeling.

Together they raced to the woods.

"Hold up, now, and get your breath," counseled Tom Norton, jerking his frantic friend to a stop.

Ed leaned against a tree trunk, panting as if he never could stop that disordered breathing.

His eyes, big and round, had in them a look as of one who had gone suddenly crazy.

"Ed!" implored his friend. "Don't look at me that way! It gives me the cold shivers!"

"If you'd been—through—what I've—been through—you'd have cold shivers—all the rest of—your life!" panted Ed, his eyes glaring worse than before.

"Get your wind, and we'll get away from this awful spot!" proposed Tom.

"I've got my—wind—now," returned Ed.

"Come on, slowly, then. It'll do you good, I guess, to be in motion."

"Anywhere—away from—there."

Tom did not speak, but held to his chum's hand as they walked rapidly.

Two or three times our hero shot a fearful look over his shoulder.

Ed acted as if he did not dare to.

Thus they hurried, at a brisk walk, for at least half-way to the county road.

"We'll soon be out on the road," Tom whispered, reassuringly.

Then Ed opened his eyes to his surroundings.

"We don't want to keep on this path," he shivered.

"We'll be followed. Ugh! I don't want to get up against that game again!"

"Nor I," Tom admitted.

He did not ask his chum what had happened, but cut into the woods at their right, propping Ed with a hand at the latter's elbow.

For fully half a mile from the path they went, in silence.

Ed showed no sign of wanting to speak, and Tom did not mean to force him.

But now that they were far both from that haunted path, and also from the county road, Tom figured that it would be a good plan to halt and rest themselves.

"We ought to be safe here, Ed," our hero proposed. "Sit down."

Ed sank obediently to the grass, his eyes half-closed.

Tom stood looking at him curiously, half-fearfully for a while.

"I hope the dear fellow ain't really going crazy," our hero thought, with a deep throb of alarm. "It must have been something awful that happened, for Ed's no coward or baby."

But when, at last, Tom figured that the silence had lasted long enough, he spoke, and sharply:

"Ed! Come back to life!"

"Oh, I guess I'm alive, all right," Murray uttered, dully, and looking up with a sickly grin.

"Well, then, it's about time to tell me what happened to you. Where were you when I called to you in there and you didn't answer? And why didn't you answer?"

"Ugh!" shivered Ed.

"A healthy, sensible old answer that is," broke in Tom, scornfully. "Come, now, get out of that trance and tell me just what happened."

"I can't tell just what happened—at that," Ed replied, in a somewhat calmer tone.

"Ed, you're not afraid now, are you?"

"Not just exactly. A fellow can't be too afraid when you're around, Tom Norton. Or, if he is, you make him feel ashamed of himself."

"Oh, Ed, old fellow, I don't want you to feel ashamed of yourself," cried Tom, generously, sinking to his chum's side on the grass and stroking Murray's hand. "But, honest, I'm not afraid any longer. At least, not afraid of anything like spooks. For, whatever that was back there, it wasn't spooks."

"Wasn't?" Ed demanded, wonderingly. "How do you make that out?"

"I've been thinking about that while we were coming along," Tom went on. "We know that Sim Goggins goes to that so-called haunted house. Now, if there were really any sure-enough spooks there, Sim Goggins would be as afraid of 'em as anybody on earth could be. I know Sim like a book, and so I know what I'm talking about."

"Then what was it?" queried Ed.

"That's what I want to figure out. Tell me what happened to you, and that'll help."

"As I said," Ed replied, "I don't know just what happened. But while I was fingering away at the door in the dark, I felt something gripping around my throat. Then I felt as if I was being lifted. I couldn't cry out, or make a sound, I was held so tightly at the throat."

"Yes; there's a purple ring around your throat," confirmed Tom, looking closely. "I hadn't noticed that before. But what else happened?"

"It wasn't so much—and yet it was awful. Of course, while I was being choked my head was sort of reeling, so I couldn't understand everything. But I remember that some awfully cold, damp hands stroked my face and hands. At least, those may have been hands, though they felt more like—well, like rubber. It was an awful feeling. It may have been the skin of snakes."

"Stop that!" interjected Tom, sharply. "You'll be getting wild-eyed again in a minute. Now, see here, Ed, I want to talk plans over with you."

"Well?"

"There's something mighty queer at that old house. And it's something that could be understood if one could go clear through the house."

"You don't want to go there again!"

"Well, of course!" rejoined young Norton, calmly. "If a gang of men went there in the day-time—and a whole lot of men at that—they go clean through the house, and nothing much would happen to them. And you could tell a yarn that would send a big gang of men there in the daytime to search and rubber!"

"Of course I could!" Murray cried eagerly. "That's just the——"

"No, it isn't," Tom disputed gravely. "Doing that way, Ed, we wouldn't have any real chance to catch Sim Goggins to rights. Don't lose sight of the fact that that's the main thing with me—to catch Sim cold up against some crooked game that he can be made to sweat for."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Nothing to-night, Ed, for the thing is too much on your nerves, yet—and most likely on mine, too. But here's a bully good place where I can curl into the bushes and go to sleep, and I'm going to risk it. I don't believe any constables will come way in here for me, and, if they do, they're just about as likely to go plumb by me without seeing me. So I'll stay here——"

"But not alone," interjected Ed.

"But you've got to get home before daylight."

"It'll do just as well if I start from here right after daylight. Then I'll manage to get up into my room, and into bed before anybody comes to call me. But when are you going to the house again—that house down there, I mean?"

"Why, that's something I want to think over through the day. And you think it over, too, Ed, and come back here after dark to-morrow night. Then, with what we've both thought out, maybe we'll have some bully good plan to talk over."

"All right," Ed nodded.

"And just remember that it ain't anything at all like spooks that we've got to figure out. But, whatever it is, we'll know to-morrow night. And we won't get in the same kind of a trap, either, for we'll know better than to start the same way."

The boys sat there talking for a long time.

While they were doing so Ed happened to remember that he had brought along rations for our hero.

Hard-boiled eggs, bacon, sandwiches, cheese—these were the things that Ed brought out of his various pockets.

And there was a small tin dish that he had brought along, too, in which our hero could fry the bacon over a twig fire.

"Why, say, I'm living a heap better than ever I did at Sim's!" cried the fugitive, eyeing the different eatables with relish.

Just as daylight was showing faintly in the east, Ed rose and started homeward.

Just before going he found a couple of matches that he had overlooked in his pockets before.

With one of these, as soon as it was broad daylight, the fugitive lighted a twig fire, fried his bacon, breakfasted royally, and then crept into his hiding place in the bush.

* * * * *

Fortunately for Tom, he slept through most of the day.

He had many uncomfortable dreams, but, except for that, he fared well enough.

Just before dark he ate again, finishing up the last of the food.

"And I haven't really got a blessed plan made up for the night," he muttered, as he finished eating. "That won't displease Ed any, though. But I can tell better, perhaps, what I ought to do, when Ed gets here with the news. He'll be sure to know what kind of efforts Sim is making to have me found. But—gracious—I hope the constables won't think of shadowing Ed out here. I'll be on the safe side, anyway!"

"Being on the safe side" meant with Tom to be out of sight—clean out of sight—when Ed arrived.

Then, if anyone else was following, that someone else wouldn't discover Master Thomas Norton.

A tree seemed about as good for the purpose as anything else. There was a big one handy, and this the fugitive climbed, just after dark, perching well up among the boughs.

It was a long wait, as our hero knew it would be, for Ed would have to go through the pretence of going to bed early, and then slip out of the house after his parents had retired.

So Norton waited patiently, thinking over the few times when he, too, had dared to slip out of Sim Goggins' house in the dead of night to join the other fellows on some lark.

"And there were the masks, and that powder keg!" he chuckled, living those few good times over again.

At last Tom heard a tramping in the woods. It came nearer, and nearer, moving almost straight toward him.

"Good gracious!" quivered the listener up the tree. "The constables can't have got any tip where to look for me, can they? I'm glad I'm way up here!"

Still nearer and nearer came the trampers.

"There's a raft of 'em, whoever they are," breathed Tom, hardly daring to breathe.

A whistle! One that he knew well, and low and cautious.

"Why, that must be Ed!" quivered the fellow up the tree. "But—"

Again the whistle. This time Tom answered it softly.

"Tom!" came the low hail. "It's all right. Don't be afraid of the crowd. They're all right!"

With that Tom Norton began to shin down the tree as fast as he could.

Others saw him coming, and ran to meet him.

"What's this?" cried Tom, wanting to rub his eyes.

"It's all right," grinned Ed. "I thought it over, as you told me to do, and I made up my mind that the only thing to do was to call out the gang. We're all here except Arch Skinner. He's got the mumps!"

All there, indeed—Dick Easton, Dave Freeman, Jim Arthur, Hob Penniman, and Hal Spicer—the same old gang that had helped more than once to cure the town of being dull!

"I knew you wouldn't mind," Ed went on, while "the gang" crowded about popular Tom, shaking hands with him.

"You've told 'em what's up?" asked Tom.

"Not the whole of it."

"Then we'll tell 'em now."

A more excited gang had never been gotten together than that which now listened to the recital by Tom and Ed.

"Did you notice that?" asked Dave Freeman, pointing to an object that he had placed on the ground on arriving.

"The powder-keg?" demanded Tom, opening his eyes.

"And we've brought the masks, too," broke in Dick Easton.

"One for you, too, by the way," chuckled Ed, producing a bit of black cambric that he passed over.

"Might as well get 'em on, too," hinted Hob Penniman.

There was prompt masking. But Tom was frowning under his mask, where the others could not see.

Why had Ed taken it upon himself to turn this serious business into a frolic?

And some of these boys might be incautious enough to talk in town the next day, and then the constables would know that Tom Norton was still lurking in the neighborhood.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," whispered Ed. "Sim has done the thing up in big shape. He's got posters out everywhere, offering three hundred dollars for your capture."

"Then he can't want me very bad," murmured Tom, "or else he feels sure that he won't get me."

"Why?"

"Because Sim thinks so much of money that he would not pay that much to get me. He'd sooner go on hunting me than spend the money. But speaking of Sim—"

"I thought that would strike you!" chuckled Ed, guessing.

"Why, of course, if we can catch Sim to-night, we'll put him through the ordeal. The big coward! We can make him tell everything he knows!"

"Of course we can!" chuckled Ed, delightedly.

"Then we'd better lose no time," proposed Tom, "for its getting late as it is."

"You're our leader, Norton, you know," chimed in Spicer. "Show us the way."

With such a gang at his back, who could be afraid?

Our hero led the way through the woods, over to a spot close to the junction of the county road and the path that led to the haunted house.

And here they hid, waiting, waiting.

Two or three wagons passed in, which the gang took no interest.

Then came a horse, the very sound of whose trot Tom Norton knew before he could see the animal.

"Sim's coming!" he whispered.

The news was passed down the line by nudges.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RISING OF BOYVILLE.

"Whoa! What's that?" called Sim Goggins.

He could just make out one figure lying in the pathway, just in front of his shying horse, while another figure bent over the prostrate one.

"Someone hurt," sounded a muffled voice. "Come and see what you can make out of it."

Sim slowly got down and went forward.

The kneeling figure had its back to him.

Sim, too, in the darkness, bent over the prostrate figure.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What— Murder!"

For four more husky figures had piled on him out of the darkness.

With a concerted, well-directed shove they sent him sideways and flat.

And still another human being brought a club down over the seat of Sim's trousers with a swat loud enough to make the horse shy again.

"Stop it!" screamed Goggins. "Stop! What do you—"

His further utterance was cut short by a wad of cotton that was stuffed into his mouth.

"Take it in, or it'll be worse for you!" sounded a gruff, menacing voice.

"We'll stand no fooling!" came in another voice. "If you make any fuss or trouble for us, this is your last night on earth—sure!"

Sim had tried to struggle himself free, but had found himself helpless with so many assailants.

"What on earth are you fellers up to?" Sim choked out, in a voice that was barely plain.

He could not talk loudly on account of the cotton.

"Lie down on your face!" came the low, sharp command.

Sim didn't want to, for he had gotten up on his knees.

But he was handled none too gently, and found himself lying face downward.

"Put your hands behind your back!" came the next gruff order, in the disguised voice of Dick Easton.

Sim didn't want to, of course, but he was beginning to be afraid of these swift, strenuous workers.

"See here," he choked out, "I haven't got any money."

"We don't want your money," came in a hollow voice, while two of the youngsters held his hands together, and a third tied the wrists fast.

His hands made secure, the young tormentors rolled Sim over on to his back.

And now they worked in another gag that they made secure.

"Raise the victim to his feet, and lead him into the fastnesses of the forest," came the order.

It was in a deep part of the forest that they halted.

Sim was shaking, as he stood at bay, surrounded by the youngsters.

One of them stepped up behind him, and Sim dodged.

"Be still, fool," came the sharp order. "I desire merely to remove that pad from your mouth. There! Fellow, you have been hauled before a tribunal. You are on trial before the council of the Independent Order of Chasteners! You have been living in sin. We shall remove that sin from you. It can be done only by confession."

"I ain't got nothing to confess," sulked Sim.

"On the contrary, you have much. You must open your heart and mind to us, or YOU WON'T SEE THE LIGHT OF ANOTHER MORNING!"

A halter was produced by one of the seven clustered around him.

"Fellow, you have been consorting with evil spirits," went on the accusing voice. "You have been going nightly to a house that is known to be haunted."

Sim gave a great start, but gasped:

"I hain't! Nothing of the sort!"

It was a hard blow with the cudgel, across the back, that made Sim bellow out, though this time he did not try to escape.

"Why have you been going to that evil house?" demanded the questioner. "Why have you held dealings with evil spirits?"

"See here," blustered Sim, "this is all boys' poppycock! I know who most of ye are, too. To-morrow I'll have things made warm for ye all!"

He peered sharply at his tormentors, to see the effect of his threat upon him.

But this was not the first time that "the gang" had heard such talk.

"Fellow," came the firm response, "if you are not mind-

ed to confess, then we must have done with you. Either confess or be destroyed!"

"There ain't nothing to confess," raged Sim, "and I'll put ye all in the lock-up to-morrow."

"Then for you, scoundrel," broke in another voice, "to-morrow shall not come!—Bring on the destroyer!"

One of the masked youngsters rolled forward the keg. Sim caught sight of that just before he was seized from behind and thrown flat.

Though he yelled lustily, they paid no heed to his cries, but coolly and swiftly bound his feet.

"Try the powder, to see if it is dry," commanded the one who seemed to have taken charge of the affair, and still in a disguised voice.

The member of the "council" who had charge of the keg tipped it over sideways, allowing a handful of grains to fall into his palm.

This he placed on a paper, laying the paper on the ground.

Flare! A lighted match was held to the corner of the paper.

Pouf! The powder went up in a brilliant flash.

"The powder is dry—excellently dry!" reported the one who had made the experiment.

"Then bring the sinner to the stake! Victim, do not shout out, or it shall be worse for you!"

Sim was lifted and borne to a near-by tree. Here, despite his many protests, he was seated on the keg, and tied there by the passing of cords around him and around the tree trunk.

Thus securely lashed, Sim began to feel that things were happening in deadly earnest.

Then, silently, one member of "the gang" laid a long fuse from the bung-hole of the keg to a point some ten feet in front of the wretched captive.

How was Sim Goggins to know that the keg contained, actually, not an ounce of gunpowder?

He didn't know. He fully believed that it did.

"Have you anything to confess now, fellow?" asked the leader of these masked ones.

"There ain't nothing to confess," declared Sim, huskily, great beads of sweat standing out on his forehead.

"Light the destroying spark!" commanded the leader.

Flare! A lighted match was held to the further end of the long fuse.

Sim watched in fascinated horror.

He saw that glowing spark start—saw it creeping closer and closer down the fuse.

"Put that thing out!" he roared hoarsely. "Put it out! I'll tell anything on earth that ye wanter know!"

"Catch those young rascals! Hurt 'em! Shoot 'em if you have ter!" cried an angry voice.

The sound of hurried steps was heard in the forest.

Two bright flashes, a couple of blinding reports, and a couple of bullets whizzed over the heads of "the gang."

There was real gunpowder in this new play.

But, even in flight, "the gang" had the presence of mind not to scoot in a bunch.

As nearly as they could they ran in seven different ways, spreading out, fan-shape, at every forward step.

"That's some of Sim's own crowd, from the haunted house!" flashed through Tom's mind, as he went through the woods, helter-skelter.

But that mask hid things from him.

Flop! Trip! His foot had caught in something.

He was down—and a heavy-footed pursuer a-top of him!

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRIAL IN THE WOODS.

"Got one of you young imps, anyway!" blazed an angry voice.

Tom's latest hope—that it might prove to be only a constable—died.

He knew all the constables thereabouts.

This fellow's voice did not belong to any of them!

"One of Sims' gang—truly!" quavered the boy, inwardly.

"Get up!"

Tom saw that his assailant was a big fellow, so he made no trouble, and was dragged along back to the spot where Sim still sat astride the keg that was powderless.

"I got one of them," announced the big fellow.

"Snake his mask off," desired Sim.

Yank! Our hero's face was exposed.

"You've got THE one!" yelled Sim Goggins, delightedly. "Oh, my, but this is luck!"

"Is this the kid who's caused all the trouble?"

"I'm sure of it," growled Sim. "He said he'd make me sorry I was alive. This is the way he has been trying to do it."

Soon one of the others came back.

Sim, released, stood up, stretched his cramped limbs, then looked gloweringly at his stepson.

Now a third man, the one whom Tom and Ed had first seen talking with Sim, returned from the chase.

He, too, was acquainted with the turn of affairs.

"Keep a good grip on him," ordered Sim, to the boy's captor. "The rest of us want to talk this over jest a bit."

Three men drew aside to talk in whispers.

Tom made no attempt to wrench free.

It would have been useless to try to escape, for these men, he now felt sure, would shoot to kill sooner than let him get away.

The three talked on for a while; then, as if they had agreed upon some course, the three came over to where Tom stood.

"See here, younker," announced the one of the trio whom the boys had first seen with Sim, "ye'd talk too much, Tom Norton, if you got back to town. So we'll keep you with us. Understand? No days off, no vacation, no pay—and some mighty hard knocks if you try to give us any trouble. Understand?"

"Yes," Tom answered.

But he thought to himself, swiftly:

"If they take me with them I'll get to the bottom of this whole thing. And it won't be long before Ed Murray and the other fellows will find a way to get to me!"

"You take charge of him again, Nate," nodded Sim. "He's to be your slave. See that ye get enough out of him. And if he tries to get away, jest kill him! That's the only thing to do."

Nate nodded, as he took hold of the boy's collar.

"Come along," he said gruffly, "and don't make no breaks to get away!"

But Tom had no notion of trying to get away—not with the prospect before him of getting to the bottom of Sim's secret.

They tramped on briskly through the woods, reaching the path by the shortest cut.

From there they kept on toward the haunted house.

"You can wait outside," admonished Tom's captor, as the others went toward the door.

They opened and went in.

But one of Sim's companions came out again, with a long-handled shovel.

"You take it," ordered Nate.

Tom obeyed, resting the handle over his shoulder.

"And don't imagine that shovel was made to hit me with, either," hinted Nate, grimly. "Now, then, march just in front of me—and remember I've got a gun trained on you!"

At the command Tom marched off, stepping into the woods again.

Just behind came Nate, ordering the boy's course.

"Halt!" came the command, when they were an eighth of a mile or so from the haunted house.

Nate stood looking around him for a few moments.

"Yes," he said, half-aloud, at last, "this is the place. I'm sure of it."

With the toe of one boot the man traced out an oblong on the ground. It was about six feet long by a little more than two wide.

"This is the spot," he said, thoughtfully. "Dig down, within this line. And be sure you don't rub out the line until you've got the place marked out."

"Then the easiest way," hinted young Norton, unlimbering the shovel, "will be to dig right along the lines now to start the hole."

"I see you're used to work," nodded Nate, grimly. "Go ahead, then, your own way."

Nate seated himself on a log, less than a dozen feet away from the boy.

In one hand the big fellow held his revolver so that he could use it at a second's notice.

Tom went on digging, with a will, until he had excavated a hole something more than two feet deep.

"How much further down do you want me to go?" asked the boy.

"Until I tell you to stop."

"Oh! Thanks!"

"And I don't want you to get fresh, either," warned Nate.

"No; I'll leave that to my elders," grimaced the boy.

He continued to throw out the dirt until the hole was a foot deeper.

"Hold on, now," advised Nate, coming forward. "Step back just a few feet, while I have a look at the thing."

As Tom withdrew, backwards, Nate advanced to the edge of the hole, and stood looking down.

"Any idea what such a hole as this looks like?" demanded Nate, fixing his eyes on the boy.

"Well, if it was longer, it might be a ditch."

"You haven't guessed yet."

"Well, maybe you're digging down to find something."

"I'm not," responded Nate. "You can have another guess, if you want it."

"I can't guess," replied Tom, shaking his head, slowly.

"Say, you're good and green, aren't you?" Nate demanded, with an evil smile.

"That's what folks say about me," Tom admitted, smilingly. "They say I'm too green to burn. Maybe I am."

"Then we won't burn you," agreed Nate. "But, say, kid, how'd you like to live in that hole?"

"It wouldn't be much good as a home," Tom replied.

"It's the only home you'll know after this!" flashed Nate.

"What's that?" gasped Tom Norton, his face going deathly white. "You don't mean that you've made me dig my own grave!"

"Well," growled Nate, "you wouldn't want me to dig it, when you're going to be the one to occupy it!"

As he spoke, the grin in his face changed to a diabolical look.

Click! Cocking his pistol, Nate raised it.

CHAPTER X.

"I'M NOT SO GREEN!"

"Don't!" faltered Tom.

Though his voice was shaking, and he was as scared as he seemed, yet he uttered that pleading word in the hope of gaining an instant's time.

As he spoke he shrank back.

Nate watched him with an evil joy.

"It's too late to talk about that, kid," he jeered.

But it wasn't.

In falling back, Tom had raised the shovel to a horizontal position, blade first.

Now, with sudden desperate aim, he let that shovel drive straight forward, praying that his aim would be true.

It was!

Plump on the chin that shovel-blade landed.

With a scream down went Nate, all but knocked out.

In his fall, he dropped the revolver, which failed to explode.

Like a flash Tom was forward.

His shaking fingers closed on that pistol.

He straightened up, backing swiftly off a few feet.

Cursing, Nate started to rise.

"I'm not so green, after all!" gritted Tom. "Get down there, Mr. Nate, if you want to live!"

To Nate's amazement he found himself looking plumply in the muzzle of the revolver.

"Put that gun down!" he ordered, gruffly.

"Shut up!" commanded Tom. "I'm boss here now!"

"You think you are. Do you suppose I'm afraid of a gun in a kid's hands?"

"You'd better be," Norton retorted tersely. "I'd kill you as quickly as I would a skunk or a snake! Try me if you don't believe me!"

"You fool boy, I was tricking you. That gun ain't loaded!" and Nate laughed, hoarsely.

"Then what are you afraid of the gun for?" demanded undaunted Tom. "Why don't you jump on me, if this gun ain't loaded."

Nate's reply was an oath.

"You see," mocked Tom, "I'm not as green as I was. I'm boss here, now, and I mean to stay boss, if I have to kill you to prove it. Lie down on your back, and keep flat."

Nate obeyed, but he asked, grumbly:

"What do you expect to do with me, kid?"

"I'm blessed if I don't wish I knew!" grimaced Tom, inwardly. "What on earth can I do with him?"

Then he started, for he very plainly heard feet hurrying through the woods.

"Keep back—whoever you are!" he shouted. "Keep back, or I'll shoot!"

"Hooray! That's Tom Norton's voice!" rang an eager cry.

"Ed Murray! That you?" cried our hero, quiveringly.

"You bet it is—and the gang with me!"

"Glory! Then hurry on!"

And on came the six youngsters, at a run.

Never before had Tom Norton been as glad to see his own crowd.

"Who's this duffer, and what's happened?" demanded Ed, breathlessly, as he reached the scene and took some of it in.

Tom recounted as hurriedly as he could.

"I know what to do," grinned Dave Freeman, drawing a cord from his pocket.

The idea didn't require explanation.

Down upon Nate piled the boys, that scoundrel being rather too much afraid to make any fuss.

"Tie his hands behind his back," suggested Dick Easton. "Not in front."

This was done in record time—done securely, too.

"Now his feet!"

That, too, was accomplished.

Ed himself provided gag material from the masks that the gang had used earlier in the night.

"Now, what?" demanded Ed, looking up.

"Why," grinned Tom, slowly, "since Mr. Nate had me dig that hole, why not let him fill it?"

A look of terror swept over the fellow's face.

But it was only momentary, for he must have realized that boys of the right sort are not bent on murder.

"Plump him down on his stomach," continued Tom. "Leave nothing but his head out."

Nate's head rested over the edge of the hole at one end.

Then Ed, with the shovel, and working very softly, began to fill the dirt in.

The others helped by tramping it down firmly.

"There, I guess you'll keep!" clicked Tom. "Now, then, you fellows, tell me how you happened to get back to me."

"You didn't suppose we'd scoot off, finding you missing, and not make any effort to find you, did you?" demanded Ed Murray, reproachfully.

"We guessed you'd fallen into the hands of Sim's crowd," flashed in Dick.

"So we went down there on the quiet sneak," broke in another boy, "and—"

"Were just in time to see Sim and another fellow driving off on Sim's wagon."

"They had two barrels in the wagon."

"But we couldn't make out where Sim's other two men were."

"So we listened."

"And heard a shovel striking off in this direction—"

"It was mighty faint, at the distance, but—"

"We thought something must be doing here, so—"

"We took a swift sneak over here, and—"

"Well, you can guess the rest, Tom," Ed wound up, breaking in on the chorus with a gesture for silence.

Tom was doing some rapid thinking.

"With Sim and one of his men away," spoke up our hero, "and this fellow accounted for, there's only one left who may be at the haunted house. Fellows, at last we'll go over there and have a look-in."

"And run into a gun, maybe," suggested Bob.

"I ain't so afraid of that, now I'm getting used to it," grinned Tom, holding up his captured weapon. "Come along, fellows. I'll keep in front and head off the danger."

"Who wants you to?" went up the indignant protest in chorus.

Tom stepped over to take a parting look at Mr. Nate.

The cut made by the shovel on that fellow's chin was bleeding a good deal.

"We can't go, anyway, until we've bound that up," muttered Tom, pointing to the cut. "Being civilized, we've got to be half-way decent."

Jim and Hop bound the cut clumsily with their hand-kerchiefs.

Ed, in the meantime, was fuming impatiently.

"We want to make something like a move over there," he urged. "We want to have our look before Sim and his other man get back."

"Come on, now," urged Tom, taking his natural place at the head of "the gang."

He led them through the woods almost at the double-quick, until they got close to the clearing.

Here he halted, pointing to a sound log that lay on the ground.

"You fellows get that up on your shoulders," he directed. "We may want it for a battering ram."

Then straight across the clearing Tom Norton led his gang.

He was the first to step close to the threshold.

Instantly the pale bluish glow shone out overhead.

From inside came the same kind of a moan that had racked their nerves the night before.

"That's done mechanically, somehow," declared Ed, bravely.

Tom tried the door. It had been mended since the night before, and was now fast.

"Back, there, you fellows!" ordered Tom. "Now, come on—at a swift run!"

Bump! as that heavy log, on the shoulders of the boys, crashed against the door, that barrier gave way like an obstacle of card-board.

"The place is all ready for the look-in," proclaimed Tom, coolly. "But I reckon we'll need something like a light. Can you fellows find something like a pitch torch?"

Dick, Dave and Jim ran back into the woods.

"I've got just the thing," called Jim, softly, after a few moments.

He came out with a dry bit of spruce, in a notch of which was a goodly bunch of inflammable resin.

"That'll burn all right, and for some minutes, too," pronounced Tom.

Ed supplied the match. The torch burned briskly after the first few efforts to keep it going.

"That's all right," nodded Tom. "Keep close to me with it, Jim."

Two and two, with Hob bringing up the rear, they stepped into the corridor in which Norton and his chum had received such a fright the night before.

Now, inspected by the light of the torch, the corridor proved to be a rather queer place.

Except for the outer door, now broken down, there appeared to be no openings in this corridor.

On three sides nothing but solid wooden wall presented itself.

"No matter!" declared Tom. "We won't wait to explore carefully. You fellows just get outside, hoist that log again, and come on a good run into this corridor. Hold the torch carefully for 'em, Jim!"

Through the corridor went the battering-ram crew, plumping the log up against the wooden wall at the end.

Crash! Another effort was needed before the wall had given way enough for the explorers to step beyond.

They found themselves now in a large room.

It took up the whole of the lower part of the house.

Where the windows were all had been solidly boarded up.

The room itself was empty, save for the inner machinery

that turned three well-hidden panels in the corridor wall. "That's what happened to you last night, Ed," smiled Tom. "You were grabbed through one of those panel openings."

"I'm glad it ain't happening to-night," grimaced Ed.

"But what has been going on in this big barn of a room, anyway?" demanded Hob, curiously, staring as far as the rays of the torch reached.

"Nothing in this room," decided our hero. "We'll look upstairs."

There was a flight of steps at the end of the room.

Awestruck, the most of them, the youngsters followed Tom and the torch-bearer up the stairs.

But above they found only four empty rooms—empty, save for a dull reflector that they found up there, artfully fitted to the front wall of the building.

From this wires ran down through the floor.

And here, also, was something that looked much like a pneumatic whistle, fitted to a pipe that also ran into the floor.

"There's the ghostly light and the moaning accounted for," grimaced Norton. "For the rest, I guess we'll find that stepping on the ground before the outer door set some kind of spring going that worked this game."

"I wonder if all haunted houses are as big fakes?" asked Hal Penniman.

"A haunted house will always bear looking into, I reckon," Tom answered.

"But there's nothing up here, except the glow and the moan," objected Ed. "This ain't enough to account for Sim's interest in the place."

"We'll have to look for the cellar," Tom declared. "Come on down, fellows."

Down they trooped, following the torch and the leader with the revolver.

So far all the mystery-hunters felt wholly disappointed.

"I thought we'd find more'n this," grumbled Hob.

"Come all over the ground floor, now," Tom directed. "Keep your eyes on the floor-boards, too, since there don't seem to be any regular cellar-way. By jinks! Ain't this a trap right here?"

Tom had stopped suddenly, clutching at Jim's arm to detain him.

Jim held the waning torch close to the floor.

"Here's a trap-door, all right, fellows," Tom declared. "Help me to get it up."

It yielded to their combined assault, and came up—a hinged trap some two feet wide and a little more than three feet in length.

Tom was down on his knees in a twinkling.

"Let me have that torch a minute, Jim," he directed. "But wait until I swing into this hole."

Getting a firm hold at the edge of the flooring, Tom took a first look downward as he let his feet through.

He swung, holding on by both hands, and just lowered his head through the trap-way, while the others crowded close, looking on in breathless curiosity.

"What's down there, do you think?" breathed Ed.

"How the dickens do you suppose I can tell. You fellows catch hold of my left arm and hold on for all you're worth. As soon as my right hand's free, Jim, hand me the torch, and I'll swing well in under this floor and have a peep."

Jim prepared to fill his part.

The others looked on in eager interest, just as Tom's head went through the trap-way again.

In their interest they forgot theirs in holding to their leader's left arm.

"Torch is going out," complained Jim.

They all turned swiftly to gaze in Jim's direction.

Wrench! Tom Norton had slipped from their detaining grasp.

Straight downward the startled boy shot.

The equally frightened lads above heard him strike something that sounded like wood.

Then there was a loud splash, followed by an indefinable sound—and then all was still.

Puff! The torch was out, leaving them all in darkness.

"Tom!" cried Ed, frantically.

There was no answer.

Then all shouted at once, but not a sound came from below.

More than one of the fellows groaned as the "creepy" feeling came over him in the total darkness of that unearthly place!

"Tom!" implored Ed, frantically, again. "Can't you answer us?"

But Norton's voice was not heard!"

CHAPTER XI.

HUMAN FIREWORKS.

Ed Murray didn't hesitate long.

"It's awful," he whispered, in the darkness. Then, raising his voice:

"If Tom's down there, and in trouble, I'm going down there, too!"

"Don't!" came up the hoarse, faint whisper.

"Is that you, Tom?" cried Ed, eagerly, as he bent his head down through the trap-way.

"Yes," came in the same kind of whisper.

"What happened to you?"

"Can't—talk—much!" came the whisper, just barely audible.

"Then I'm going down, and find out why you can't!" insisted Ed.

"Don't! Wait until I can talk."

This effort at talking, spoken just a bit more loudly, was followed by a fit of strangling coughing on Tom's part.

The boys above listened, wild with curiosity, not unmixed with fear.

"You ain't in any danger, are you?" Ed demanded, anxiously.

"No."

"All right, then. I'll wait a bit for you to talk, since you seem to want me to. We won't speak again until you speak to us."

The sound of more coughing came up from below, followed by painful wheezing.

But, at last, Tom Norton's voice sounded:

"Hey, fellows!"

"Yes!" Ed called down, eagerly, while the others crowded closer.

"There's a vat—under that trap-way."

"A vat?"

"Yes."

"What's in it?"

"I don't know—but it burns and strangles a fellow!"

"Something hot in the vat?" Ed demanded.

"No; it's cold to the touch—but, oh, how it burns the throat and shuts off the breathing!"

"By crackey!" uttered Ed. "I wonder what it can be. Hey, Tom!"

"Yes?"

"How deep is the stuff in the vat?"

"It can't be more than three feet."

"Does it burn the skin?"

"Not the outside skin."

"Then I'm going to drop down and find out for myself what it is."

"Be careful!"

"I will!"

Curiosity ruling fully as much as did courage, Ed let himself through the trap-way, then dropped, feet foremost.

Another splash, followed by an "ouch."

"What is it, Ed?" demanded Dave Freeman.

"Wait until I get a chance to taste it! Ugh! Alcohol! Must be two or three hundred gallons here. But you fellows can drop safely, if you take pains to come feet first. And be careful to come down with your mouths shut. I guess Tom had his open, and swallowed some of the stuff. Now, I'm out of the vat, and the rest of you can come—one at a time, you know."

And down they went, just as full of curiosity as youngsters could be. And they found Tom in the darkness, and thumped him royally between the shoulder-blades until they helped him to raise most of the alcohol off his lungs.

But how they all smelled of the stuff!

"Who'd you leave behind, up above?" demanded Tom, as soon as he could speak with more comfort.

Then came a gasp of realization.

"Nobody," confessed Dave.

"Humph!" grunted Ed. "We'll have a merry time getting up and out of this again."

"Oh, we'll manage it," Tom rejoined. "Here's the wooden cover that was over the vat. We can put it on the vat again, when we're ready, and one fellow can stand on another's shoulders and get hold of the floor above. That will be somewhat easy. But now that we're all down here, we'd better have a look at this place."

"Hope we don't run into anyone down here," uttered Hob, nervously. "Got that gun yet, Tom?"

"Yep. It was in my pocket, and didn't drop out when I fell."

"Get it out and ready, then," urged one fellow.

"And be blamed careful you don't hit any of us by mistake," quivered another.

"Left your torch behind, I suppose, Jim?" called someone.

"No; I've got it here. But the pitch is about all burned off, and the hanged thing won't light."

"Won't?" grinned Tom, in the darkness. "With hundreds of gallons of alcohol to soak it in!"

"I never thought of that," muttered Jim, and made some hasty dips with the torch into the vat into which they had all fallen.

Then a match was tried again.

Sputter! and the torch was ablaze.

Yet it gave a garish, blue light that did not throw much illumination, though it made the clustered faces look unearthly enough.

"I reckon we're about on to the whole game, now," announced Tom, pointing to the vat. "Sim and his friends have been making alcohol here on the sly."

"Why should they do it on the sly?" asked Jim Arthur.

"Why, you chump," jeered Ed, "on account of the profit, of course."

"But wouldn't there be just as much profit if they did it in Sim's barn?"

"Well, hardly," uttered Ed, scornfully. "You see, Jim, the government puts a big tax on alcohol, and that makes it cost way up."

"How much?" asked Tom, quickly.

"Well, about two dollars and a half a gallon."

"And how much does it cost to make alcohol, Ed?"

"About twenty cents a gallon, I've heard."

"Whew!" uttered Tom. "So Sim and his friends have been making something that there's over two dollars a gallon profit on? No; not that much, I suppose, for they have had to divide the profit with some fellow who could sell it for 'em in the open market. But, whew! What a big profit there is in it, anyway!"

"If you don't get caught," said Ed wisely.

"Oh, Sim's caught all right, this time," retorted Tom, grimly. "And caught about as hard as any fellow could want to be, too. But they make alcohol with some sort of distilling apparatus, I believe."

"A thing they call a still," Ed supplied.

"Then where's the still? It must be somewhere here in this cellar. Come on, and we'll try to find it."

Their search was a short one.

Almost immediately they found themselves up against what looked to be a very solid partition of hard oak boards.

"The still'll be on the other side of this wall," mused Tom, after studying the wooden surface while Jim held the alcohol-soaked torch close. "So, fellows, some of us will have to get up above and pass that beam down."

Tom led the way, Jim keeping close to him, and the others clustering near as they moved.

"Will Sim be wild, though?" chortled Ed, as they got close to the vat.

"He will!" roared a voice over their heads that sent the boys crowding back on each other in terror.

For there in the trapway, his haggard, evil face lighted by the rays of a lantern, suddenly appeared Sim Goggins himself.

"What are you young fiends doing down there?" raged Sim. "Can't mind yer own business, eh? I'll teach ye! The last time ye'll need it, too! Hand me that torch, Anse!"

Before the startled boys could realize what was happening, Sim thrust a blazing torch through the trap-way.

Plunge! Down it came!

Pouf! There was an almost smothered sound of a tiny explosion.

Then the whole top of the vat burst into bluish flames.

Overhead, Sim and others could be heard running across the floor.

"Put it out!" screamed Hob, as the alcohol flared up, boiling and roaring like a small volcano.

"Go ahead and do it, then!" faltered Tom, drawing back from the seething iron vat.

It was a mass of flames, now, pouring straight up toward the trap-way. It was so hot that not one of the youngsters could get within a dozen feet of the vat.

"There goes the floor, too!" screamed Easton.

"Lord," quivered another youngster, "the whole building will catch and come tumbling down on us."

"Now, Tom, if you're our leader, find a way out of here for us!" cried Hal Penniman, tremulously.

"A way out?" repeated Tom, with the calmness of absolute despair that now settled down on him. "There isn't any such thing as a way out! All we can do, fellows, is to stand here and watch. If there was a way out Sim Goggins would have stopped it up."

As the boiling, blazing contents of the vat threw more and more light around their small, shut-in portion of the cellar, some of the youngsters ran frantically around, looking for some possible way out of the infernal place.

It did not take them long, though, to find out what Tom already knew—that the trap-way, right over the big, blazing jet of alcohol-fire, was the only way out of this pit.

So back they came to their leader, dumb and anguished, staring in terror at the mounting column of blue flame.

Crackle! The floor, at one side of the trap-way, was burning merrily!

Merrily—for anyone except the condemned ones beneath who watched in speechless horror!

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Hob came back, shuddering.

He had roamed off, in the now brilliant light, to see if he could find some part of the small cellar where there

would be less danger of being caught under blazing beams when the burning house came down on them.

He had found nothing to give hope.

"Fellows, do you see one thing?" called Tom, at last.

"What?" came, in a gasping chorus.

"The alcohol is burning down. It'll soon be burned out."

"But what good does that do us?" demanded Dave. "Look at that floor. It's wrapped in flames. Nothing could get through that blaze alive!"

Tom looked and watched.

It wasn't in him to say die when there was a ghost of a show of fighting for life.

Lower and lower went the blue blaze from the vat, to be replaced by the ruddy glow of dry, burning wood above.

As the alcohol blaze sank below the edge of the vat, Tom drew close, looking down into it.

"There! It's out!" he panted.

"What good does that do?" Ed asked, dully.

"Quick, you fellows!" cried the leader, hoarsely. "Get that wooden cover over the vat. Now, then, all together with you!"

Not one of the youngsters saw any hope of getting out alive through the blazing trap-way above.

But the voice of a leader always arouses to action when men have sunk into the depths of despair.

They rushed around the big wooden vat-cover.

"Up with it!" ordered Tom.

They got it in place over the vat, though not one of the dull youngsters seemed in any hurry over the job.

"Ed," announced Norton, looking around over his friends, "you can bear my weight better than any of the other fellows. Climb up on that cover!"

Ed was quick enough to obey, though he did not see the use.

"Say, it's hot up here," cried Ed, wincing at the heat reflected by the flames above."

"I know it," gritted Tom, leaping to his side. "It'll be hotter where I'm going. You, Dave—come up here, too. Now, you two, brace yourselves and stand firmly together! Now!"

With a leap Tom climbed up to their shoulders.

There he knelt for just an instant, his mouth closed in that hot, stifling atmosphere.

Then straight up he raised himself.

The boys below looked on anxiously as our hero thrust his face almost into the blaze.

On three sides of the trap-way the wood was blazing fiercely.

On the fourth side there was just a small space that was not yet ignited.

"You can't get through there!" panted Ed.

"I can—and I will!"

Tom made a leap, catching at the flooring with his hands.

But the smoke and the heat got down his throat, choking him.

For an instant he held on, trying to draw himself up and through.

Then, with a moan, the boy let go and came down. Ed and Dave caught him.

"It's no use," groaned Ed.

"It is, I tell you," Tom cried, fiercely.

"Going to try again?"

"Of course I am!"

"Brave—but useless!" was Ed's grim comment.

"Now, then, brace yourselves—you two!"

Down below Hob had a brilliant idea.

"Help!" he roared. "Help! Help!"

It was doing something, anyway, to shout, so the rest joined him.

"Brace yourselves!" Tom ordered again.

Once more he climbed to their shoulders.

"Help!" roared Hob.

Tom made the leap, caught the part of the flooring that was not yet ablaze.

Then began the desperate fight to get a better hold, and to draw himself up.

"Good! Come on!" cried a ringing voice above. "I'll help!"

Two small, slim, soft hands had caught at Norton's left wrist.

Whoever was behind those hands held on with the grimness of a last fight.

"Hold tight!" chattered Tom. "And I'll make it!"

A struggle, a wriggle, and he drew himself, hot and scorched, up through the trap-way to the flooring above.

From below went up a cheer that rang with new hope.

But Tom, safe on the floor, was gasping with amazement.

For now, in the ruddy glow he caught full sight of the one who had aided him so splendidly.

A slight, sixteen-year-old girl, with fluffy, light hair, peachy cheeks, and steady blue eyes.

But Tom must think of those whom he had left behind in peril.

"Steady, you fellows down there, and we'll get you all out!" he roared.

Then, groaningly, to the girl:

"Oh, if we only had a rope!"

"There's one in the wagon! I'll get it!" she cried, rising and leaping away.

Tom's eyes followed her for just an instant.

Then he looked around him, and beat out the fire around the trap with his coat.

All of one end of the house, from the middle down to the end was ablaze.

The flames were mounting so high that even the roof must catch and come crashing in within the next five minutes.

Here on the floor the air was so stifling that Tom was forced to drop to his knees and crouch low, in order to find air that could be breathed.

"Here!" cried the girl.

She had darted back into the smoke, holding out a long rope.

Now she dropped to her knees beside Tom.

"It's all right now, fellows, if you can keep cool and mind," choked Tom, as he crept close to the trap-way and let one end of the rope through. "Be steady, and quick, and we don't need to lose a life!"

Then, remembering the slight figure of the girl who had offered to hold the rope with him, Norton called sharply:

"The lightest one of you all, first! Jim Arthur! And hustle, Jim!"

Then Tom and the girl braced themselves as best they could in that stifling air.

They felt a pull on the rope and held on.

Jim's head showed above the floor.

He was out and beside them.

"Catch hold of the rope, Jim!" he commanded. "You, miss, hurry outside, where the air's safe to breathe."

"No, no!" cried the girl. "I'll hold on until you get at least one more out."

Dave came up next.

"Get hold of the rope, Dave," came the crisp order. "Now, miss, please—please!—get outside where you'll be safe!"

Ed was coming now. Tom turned to see how his chum would make it through that stifling trap-way.

"Get your mouth shut, and don't breathe any more than you have to, Ed!" called Norton, through the stifling smoke and fumes.

Three more came up in swift succession.

All up, out and safe!

And now Tom turned to look behind him.

There still crouched the girl, gasping, her face white, her head heavy.

"You didn't get out of this when you could!" cried Tom, reproachfully. "Come!"

Making no bones of the matter, he caught her up in his arms, straightened up, and ran out into the corridor, thence into the open air.

Out there the sight was gloriously picturesque!

All the clearing around the house was now lighted up as though by the sun itself!

The ruddy glow was over everything, the red light shining now on happy faces.

Tom, coming out through the doorway with the girl in his arms, forgot to put her on her feet as he turned, stopped, and looked back at the building.

"You needn't carry me any further," came a sweet, amused voice.

"Oh, excuse me, please!" muttered Tom, awkwardly, and let her down to her feet, though he kept one arm clumsily around her until he saw that she was able to stand.

"We got them all out?" she demanded, eagerly.

"Everyone of us—thanks to you, miss!"

"Oh, I'm so happy! I must run and tell papa!"

"Your father, miss?"

"He's over there in the buggy," stated the girl, pointing to where the path came into the edge of the clearing.

Tom watched her as she darted away to hail a man who sat in a buggy, holding the lines over a smart-looking horse.

"Wonder why he sent his daughter, when he could help instead?" pondered Tom.

"Gracious! I didn't believe there was a ghost of a show to get out of that fearful place!" sputtered Ed Murray in his ear.

"One fellow won't be pleased that we did," Tom declared, vimfully.

"Sim!"

"Ed, this means that Sim will get his deserts. I've done what I wanted to—found a way to get square with him!"

"No," grimaced Ed, "you've spoiled it!"

"How?"

"By getting us all out of there you've queered Sim's chance of getting hanged!"

"He'll get enough, anyway, for this wild night's work," cried Tom, vengefully.

"If he's ever caught. He may have skipped."

"He can't have got far yet," uttered Tom. "And he'll be recognized by anyone who sees him. There ain't many men with such an ugly, slimy, hideous face as Sim Goggins wears seven days in the week."

"What in the world did this all mean?" broke in the girl, her eyes large with wonder.

She had come back from speaking with her father in the buggy.

"It'll be a shorter story," smiled Tom, "if you'll tell us how you ever came to be here just in the nick of time."

"Why, there isn't much to tell on our side," smiled the girl. "Papa is a cripple, you know. He's David Holcomb, of Winchester. He comes over to this town, once in a while, to see your Dr. Graham. We had been to the doctor's this evening, and were just driving home."

"We came to where that path goes into the county road. We had just noticed a blaze off here in the woods, and we wondered if somebody's home was going up in flames. Then we saw three men come out of the path and hurry across the road. We didn't like their looks. They seemed to be sneaking."

"I was very sure something was wrong, and papa said we would drive down this path as fast as we could. Papa has lots of courage, you know, even if he is a cripple."

"His daughter has inherited some of his grit," Tom broke in gently.

"We drove down here as fast as we could," the girl hurried on. "When we saw this place we thought it must be some old deserted house that had been set afire. We were going away again. But just then we heard someone shouting for help. So I ran into the house. I got there just in time to get hold of your wrist."

"And you saved every blessed one of us!" uttered Tom, fervently.

"Oh, no," she corrected. "Even if I hadn't been there,

you'd have gotten all hands out. I saw both how brave and how courageous you are! You're just splendid when manhood and grit are needed!"

Tom blushed furiously. It was the first time he had ever heard anything of that sort from a girl's lips, and he liked it.

"Brave, is he?" uttered Ed. "Well, I guess!"

"Oh, come," protested Tom. "What are we waiting here for, anyway? We don't care about seeing that old shell shoulder out. It's most all burned now. And we may be letting Sim get away!"

"Sim?" queried the girl. "Oh, pardon me. I didn't mean to seem curious."

"Why, we can tell you all about it," agreed Tom, "as you drive through the woods. That is, if you and your father care to drive slowly enough."

"As if we'd miss anything like that!" cried the girl, eagerly. "There must be something thoroughly romantic behind all this night's scenes."

"Romantic?" repeated Tom. "No; nothing but just what's low-down and cowardly."

With plainly a good deal of pride, Grace Holcomb led the boys to where her father sat in his buggy.

She introduced him as Major Holcomb, and Tom learned later that years ago he had been crippled in an Indian campaign, and had been retired from the army.

Tom could tell a story quickly. He had this one, in condensed form, told by the time that they reached the county road.

"And now, Major and Miss Holcomb," hinted Tom, raising his cap, "I reckon we'll have to thank you and run in the same breath. We've got to hurry to town and set the officers on Sim Goggins' track."

"Where does he live?" asked the major, quickly.

"In that farmhouse that you can just see the chimneys of from here."

"Then I'll tell you," proposed the major, with the eagerness of one who loves to command, "you youngsters just hang around in hiding, near enough to watch the house. I'll drive to town and get the officers."

"Oh, if you will—please!" quivered Tom.

"I will—make no mistake about that—Tom Norton!"

"I wonder if Sim's there?" palpitated Tom, a few minutes later, when he and his "gang" hid on a slope that looked down toward the farmhouse.

"There are lights in the house, anyway," breathed Ed.

"I hope the officers get here in time! Lord, after what I've suffered at Sim Goggins' hands—and what my mother suffered!—I wouldn't take a million dollars and see this night turn out wrong!"

"And the present Mrs. Goggins!" hinted Ed. "It'll be a great relief for her to be free from such a fellow."

"Yes," agreed Tom, eagerly. "Especially, as she can probably get hold of enough of Sim's money to live comfortably on."

"Would she take money that Sim piled up by beating the law?" asked Ed.

Tom's face clouded.

"No," he replied slowly. "I hadn't thought of that. Ma'am Goggins is a crushed and broken woman, but she's good all the way through. No; Ma'am Goggins wouldn't be willing to live on crooked money. Poor soul!"

"Maybe it ain't all crooked money that Sim Goggins has got," suggested Dave Freeman.

"Yes, it is," contended Tom, bitterly. "Sim Goggins wouldn't know how to pile up any other kind."

The hidden boys, looking down at the moving lights in the farmhouse, had nearly an hour to wait.

Then they saw the major's buggy returning along the road.

It was followed by a wagon in which rode six men—three constables and three citizens who had been sworn in.

Before reaching Sim's gate the vehicles stopped.

The law's representatives alighting, went forward stealthily.

In the yard, one man was posted at each of the four corners of the house.

The other two knocked loudly at the back door.

Just what followed the boys, now hurrying forward, did not see fully.

But, by the time that Tom Norton and his "gang" reached the backyard, Sim was just being led out, handcuffed.

"You, Tom Norton? You here?" choked Sim, drawing back and staring hard.

"It was through the boys that we got on to your little doings, Sim," observed Constable Brewster, grimly. "It's funny, too, how you managed to run that queer game right under the noses of folks and never got found out until a boy got on your trail."

"Sim," spoke Tom Norton, slowly, sternly, "the chances are big enough that you'll spend the rest of your days in a striped suit and sleeping on a hard bench. I told you I'd pay you back for all you did to my mother, and all you did to me. I've been holding it all in for years, but at last I've been able to do something to settle the long score!"

Sim, a coward through and through when up against real trouble, was now sobbing.

"I—I never thought I'd have anything to fear from you, Tom Norton!" he choked. "I thought ye was too green to amount to anything."

"Sometimes," grimaced our hero, "it doesn't pay to go through life banking on others being too green!"

Mrs. Goggins did not come out as her husband was led away. For once in her life she did not have to be afraid of him or show any interest in his fate.

Tom told the officers where to get the other member of Sim's crowd.

"Now, Tom, you come home with me," urged Ed Murray, hospitably.

"No, sir!" broke in Major Holcomb, tartly. "The young man has accepted an invitation to come home with me to-night. He is worth three average young men, and I

want to have a talk with him in the morning. Tom Norton, this buggy seat is wide. I think we can make room for you."

* * * * *

It turned out, on the trial, that Sim had invested five thousand dollars in his illegal still at the old haunted house.

He had just begun to get his untaxed, illegal product into the market through a dealer who was not above such business.

So Sim had made no money out of his unlawful enterprise.

But he was sentenced to ten years in State Prison, just the same.

Three months later he committed suicide.

Ma'am Goggins and Bess inherited comfortably from Sim's estate.

So, too, did Lug and Bunch Goggins. But their guardian got away with their money a while ago, and, as Ma'am Goggins couldn't be located in time, Sim's two sons were sent to an institution. Those two boys'll never amount to much, anyway.

The members of Tom's "gang" are all alive, and, being young men now, they are doing well for themselves.

But Tom? Major Holcomb opened a new life to him. He admired our hero so much that he took young Norton under his own charge.

With the major's backing Tom was able, a little while ago, to carry out his wish of going into business with Ed. The young partners are on the way to fortune.

Next month Tom Norton is going to become Major Holcomb's son-in-law.

THE END.

Some boys start out in life by having everything easy and prosperous. Do they get along any better than the youngsters who have to work and fight for all they have? It's a great question, and it's a great story that will be published complete in No. 23 of "The Wide Awake Weekly," out next week. The title is "IN FOOL'S PARADISE; OR, THE BOY WHO HAD THINGS EASY." The author is Fred Warburton, and he has just finished one of the best stories that he ever wrote. Don't miss next week's treat!

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